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Dreaming a Latina dream

Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* in the Literature Class

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PRELIMINARIES

The House on Mango Street was originally published in 1984 by Arte Público Press, a regional publishing house run by Nicholas Kanellos, and remains one of the best-known Chicana novels to date. Set in a contemporary Latino *barrio* of Chicago, *The House on Mango Street* is composed of forty-four interrelated stories or *vignettes* narrated by Esperanza Cordero. Through Esperanza’s perspective, the reader learns about the *barrio*, its inhabitants and their lives, circumstances and problems and witnesses the process of maturation experienced by the young narrator as she grows to define her identity as a woman, and as writer and as a member of the Chicano and, more generally, the Latino community of the US. According to the US Census Bureau, the Latino community is the major minority in the US. Among this heterogeneous ethnic group, the so-called Chicano community is most prominent. The term “Chicano,” which originates within the Chicano Movement in the 1960’s as a term of self-representation, is used to describe the ethnic origin of residents or US citizens of Mexican descent². It should be born in mind that *The House on Mango Street*, which was the recipient of the American Book Award in 1985, is one of the Chicano texts which has received major critical attention in the past 30 years. Since its republication by Vintage

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² For a further discussion on the term “Chicano,” see Bruce-Novoa ([1980] 1999) and Tatum (2006).

Contemporaries (Random House), the book has sold about three million copies and is a required reading in high schools and colleges in many states of the US.

As noted by Gutiérrez-Revuelta (1985), McCracken (1989), Eysturoy ([1996] 2000), Saldívar-Hull (2000) and Nagel (2001), defining the genre of this text cannot be done without certain difficulty. Most critics agree that the text can be regarded as a coming of age story-cycle, composed of stories, *vignettes* or *barrio historias* which should be placed, following McCracken (1989), midway between ‘the intensity of the short story and the discursive length of the novel’ (64). McCracken (1989) states that Cisneros’s book makes for a revised version of the individualistic *Bildungsroman*³, which is, in turn, a form of opposing the dominant discourse. Originally, the book was, according to this researcher, four times marginalized due to its ideology and language, and the writer’s gender and ethnicity. In exploring the so-called *story cycle* genre, Nagel (2001) examines the structure of *The House on Mango Street*, which he believes falls into the domain of this category. According to Nagel, the book, a *Latino Bildungsroman*, can be divided into four groups of stories, which reveal a gradual transition from Esperanza’s childhood experiences at home in the *barrio* of Chicago to the confrontation with adult obligations and socio-cultural realities. Esperanza’s quest for identity and the desire to own a *decent* house —one you can point to without feeling shame— remain unifying motifs in the book.

Authors such as Karafilis (1998) have devoted many pages to examine the particular generic nature of *The House on Mango Street*, which they believe is purposefully set to flout the conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* as found in the production of writers who can be more easily placed within the US Anglo-American literary tradition (N. Hawthorne, M. Twain, H. James, R. Wright). According to Karafilis, Cisneros modifies the traditional form of the *Bildungsroman*, usually concerned about individual experiences and the construction of

³ As this class is meant for advanced university students of English or Spanish, I assume students have already become familiar with the notion of *Bildungsroman* and applied it to different texts. It is generally useful to call attention as to the origin and development of this German literary genre, which typically focuses on the “formation” (*Bildung*) of a young man through a number of experiences, problems, encounters, which help him shape an understanding of himself and his social circumstances. The genre was imported into England, France and the US through the translation of German classics. Writers and local traditions have added new dimensions to this genre, which has caused much debate and controversy around different literary and academic circles. Although this is not the topic of the lesson, we might consider, following Feng (2000), the category of *female Bildungsroman* to think of *Mango Street*. For a further discussion on the subject, see: Butcher (1982), Kornfeld and Jackson (1997) and Feng (2000).

sameness, to focus on the construction of sameness *and* otherness —the individual within a community— as seen from a point of view which is imbued in a non-Anglo value system. With this respect, Karafilis further argues that there are three ways in which *The House on Mango Street* appropriates and modifies the traditional *Bildungsroman*: '[Cisneros's] emphasis on the communal instead of the individual, her emphasis on fragmented and circular narrative patterns instead of linear movement, and her critique of American materialism and manipulation of the stereotypical "American Dream" to include those usually excluded- the poor and/or nonwhite.' (66) While these three modes of revision can be seen as interrelated, in this class I will focus more specifically on the third aspect; i.e. on the questioning of the American Dream from a non canonical perspective.

In the sections to follow, I will present the different stages of a class dealing with this topic. This class would be meant for advanced university students of US Literature, both in the English and the Spanish Teaching Training Course. It responds to the activities set for tutorials of around 30 students. In practice, the class would last two hours and it could be either conducted in English or Spanish.

LESSON OBJECTIVES:

At the end of the class, I expect students will be able to:

1. Identify the actualization(s) of the American Dream in *The House on Mango Street*,
2. Account for the construction of the main character's (American) dream(s),
3. Relate *The House on Mango Street* to other literary texts in terms of the presentation of the American Dream.

In previous classes, we have:

- explored the notion of the American Dream as presented in different texts in the syllabus,
- introduced Sandra Cisneros as a writer belonging to the Chicano community.

Prior to the class, students have read *The House on Mango Street* (henceforward: *Mango Street*) by Sandra Cisneros ([1984] 1991).

FOCUS TASK: Read Sandra Cisneros's *Mango Street* and answer the following questions:

1. Identify the sections of *Mango Street* in which the notion of the American Dream is made prominent.
2. What version of the American Dream is actualized in the novel? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

IN CLASS

1. Elicitation of students' preliminary impressions of their reading of *Mango Street*. (Time allowed 5-10 min.)

Aim: This task is aimed at eliciting students' personal response to the text before starting a discussion of its most salient aspects. It is my belief that a literature course should promote not only students' understanding of texts but also stimulate their pleasure towards reading.

2. Brief review of the notion of the American Dream. (Time allowed: 10 min.)

Aim: Considering that the American Dream is usually part of the contents of US Literature courses, I assume that students are well-versed in the concept. This is why this task only aims at reviewing the literature on the topic dealt with in the course introductory classes (Allen, 1969; Madden, 1970).

3. Teacher's short introduction into the topic of the class, its goals, and the book (genre & structure). (Time allowed: 10 min.)

Aim: This short presentation will serve to revise and establish a few theoretical concepts as well as the perspective of analysis which will be followed all throughout the class.

4. Whole class discussion of the answers provided by students to question 1: identify the sections of *Mango Street* in which the notion of the American Dream is made prominent. (Time estimated: 10-15 min.)

Aim: This discussion is aimed as a first introduction into the topic of the American Dream in Cisneros's text.

I expect students will be able to identify the following episodes of the book in which the notion of the American Dream is made quite prominent. I plan to record students' answers on the blackboard/whiteboard for later use and reference:

- ✓ "The House on Mango Street" (3-5),
- ✓ "Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water" (62-64),
- ✓ "No Speak English" (76-78),
- ✓ "Bums in the Attic" (86-87),
- ✓ "A Smart Cookie" (90-91),
- ✓ "Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps" (106-107).
- ✓ "A House of My Own" (108),
- ✓ "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes" (109-110).

5. Pair-work discussion of answers given to question 2 (What version of the American Dream is actualized in the novel? Support your answer with evidence from the text), followed by a negotiation and re-elaboration of their original answers. (Time allowed: 15 min.)

Aim: This task attempts to contribute to students' critical appreciation of the given text. Also, by exchanging their views and re-elaborating on the questions, students are made to put their analytical criteria and opinions to a test. By requiring students to produce textual evidence, I intend to develop students' analytical, reading and linguistic skills, which are central in the course syllabus.

I expect the following ideas will emerge as we get involved in a whole class discussion of conclusions, in which students will have to provide textual evidence to support their ideas. (Time allowed: 10-15 min.):

- ✓ *Mango Street* actualizes the American Dream through the main character's (and her family's) hopeless longing to own a house, which remains a cornerstone of the Dream.

A few fragments to illustrate the point:

This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket and this was the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed. (“The House on Mango Street”)

What about a house, I say, because that's what I came for.
Ah, yes, a home in the heart. I see a home in the heart.
Is that *it*? (“Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water”)

I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works. (...) One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. (“Bums in the Attic”)

- ✓ *Mango Street* presents a negative version of the American Dream, which seems to exclude the Latino community. And in so doing, the book questions the very essence and nature of the dream.

A few fragments to illustrate the point:

But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath.(...) 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 those things go. (“The House on Mango Street”)

I am tired of looking at what we can't have. When we win the lottery ... Mama begins, and then I stop listening. People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills. (“Bums in the Attic”)

- ✓ *Mango Street* recreates Esperanza's wish (and possibility) to leave the *barrio* in order to pursue the twin goals of becoming a writer and leading an independent life.

A few fragments to illustrate the point:

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. (“A House of My Own”)

Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?
They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (“Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”)

NB: Although not wholly expected, students might also reflect upon a few episodes in the book which are also relevant to the construction of the American Dream: Esperanza's purchase of a replica of the Statue of Liberty ("Gil's Furniture: Bought & Sold," 20) and her contemplation of the strength of the trees outside her house ("Four Skinny Trees," 74-75), which can be read, following Nagel (2001), as an analogy to Esperanza's inner growth.

6. Small group discussion now focuses on Esperanza's dream/s. In order to promote students' reflection and participation, I will divide the class in groups of five people. Presumably, there will be two groups working with each of the questions below, which will be advantageous at the time of sharing conclusions. As students work, I will go around the groups helping and exchanging ideas with them, if necessary. Students will also be required to make notes concerning the question they must answer so that they can produce a brief oral presentation summing up their conclusions before the whole class. The following questions will guide the analysis (Time allowed: 20 min.):

Question 1

- ✓ Characterize Esperanza's dream/s. What does she dream of? Does her dream remain static all throughout the text? Is her dream comparable to that of other characters in *Mango Street*? Find examples in the text to support your answer.

Question 2

- ✓ Reread the story "Bums in the Attic" to examine Esperanza's position towards home ownership. Can her dream house be equaled to the possession of private property described in this story? Why/Why not?

Question 3

- ✓ *Mango Street* has been defined as a *Latino Bildungsroman*. As such, consider the different stages in the maturation process experienced by Esperanza. What is the knowledge she has obtained by the end of the book? Identify the presence and function of mentors in this process of inner growth.

Aim: Through this task, I intend to narrow the discussion of the American Dream to Esperanza's experiences, longings and circumstances. This will allow us to focus on the main actualization and questioning of the dream in the text. Also, this task will also demand some writing and oral practice.

When the time set is up, I will re-organize the class so we can all listen to each of the answers provided by the groups. (Time allowed: 15-20 min.)

I reasonably expect that the groups will come up with some of the following conclusions, which will in turn be reshaped by the whole class discussion and exchange of ideas. These conclusions will be recorded on the blackboard:

- ✓ Esperanza wishes to own a house which can be regarded as decent and safe, a house in which she can be free of social conventions arising from the mandates of her cultural community (marrying, taking care of a husband and children) as much as from the value system inscribed in the “official” version of the American Dream, which implies the possibility of social mobility and the assimilation into white or Anglo America.
- ✓ Her dream to possess private property is not the same throughout the book. Esperanza's experiences and encounters with others will modify this originally individual dream to include others through her awareness of communal and social responsibilities.
- ✓ The young girl also dreams of becoming a writer. As the stories unfold, this desire becomes intimately connected with the need to have a *house of one's own*.
- ✓ There are a number of significant encounters and episodes which contribute to the process of self-awareness experienced by Esperanza and which take on a fundamental role in her quest for identity:
 - Minerva, the woman who writes poems and exchanges them with Esperanza,
 - Aunt Guadalupe, Esperanza's dying aunt, who recognizes her talent and encourages her to keep writing as that will set her free,
 - Alicia, a teenage girl, who works and goes to college in order to find a better place in the world, in which remembering who one *is* becomes a moral and social duty.

- The Smart Cookie, Esperanza's mother, who tells her not to ever feel *ashamed* of herself, and encourages her to fight for her dreams.
- The three aunts, *las comadres*, who can appreciate her talent as a writer and foretell she will leave but advise her not to forget her origin.

NB: I would invite students to consider the double questioning of the American Dream we can find in Mango Street. On the one hand, the book questions the exclusion of immigrants from the mainstream of American experience. Apparently and as the book illustrates through different episodes, many will find it hard or impossible to lead a self-fulfilling life and achieve their American Dream. The individual character of the Dream and its materialistic foundation are put to question as well. The emphasis on the communal rather than on the individual is clearly exemplified by the fact that Esperanza longs for a house which will host bums as much as by the fact that she will leave the barrio, only to come back to save the others who cannot out. On the other hand, the book also conveys the view that the Latino community might adhere to the "official" version of the Dream. Finally, the text is critical towards the expectations of the Latino community towards the role of women in society. Esperanza will struggle against the patriarchal mandates of her own community and those of Anglo America to shape and assert her identity as a Chicana woman writer.

7. Communication of the assignments to continue working on the topic at home. Students will have two weeks to develop **ONE** of the following written assignments (Time allowed: 5-10 min.):

- ✓ Compare and contrast the presentation of the American Dream in Cisneros's *Mango Street* and in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Inform your reading by considering the views expressed in "Family Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*" by Jacobson (1975). Support your ideas by introducing textual evidence. Write a 700-1000 word **essay**. Follow either the Harvard Reference System or the MLA Manual of Style to write your piece.

OR

- ✓ Characterize the quest for identity in Cisneros's *Mango Street* as compared to that evidenced in Ellison's "Flying Home." In your analysis, consider the influence of socio-cultural conventions in the young characters' shaping of their dreams and ambitions. Inform your reading by considering the views expressed in "Ralph Ellison and the Bird-Artist," by Sadler (1979). Support your ideas by introducing textual evidence. Write a 700-1000 word **essay**. Follow either the Harvard Reference System or the MLA Manual of Style to write your piece.

Aim: This task is aimed at developing students' analytical and writing skills, in preparation for term tests and final papers.

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