

from “Cisneros’ Revision of the ‘Bildungsroman’ Novel”
by Maria Karafilis, University of Maryland (1998)

In *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros appropriates and revises the traditional European “Bildungsroman” by emphasizing the communal instead of the individual, by telling her story in fragmented and circular narrative patterns instead of linear movement, and by her critique of American materialism and manipulation of the stereotypical “American Dream” to include those usually excluded: the poor and/or non-white.

One of the most explicit ways Cisneros reconciles dominant American culture and traditional Mexican culture is through her focus on the community. Several critics have examined how Cisneros supplants a focus on the “private,” individual development of the protagonist by emphasizing the critical role the surrounding Chicano community plays in Esperanza's maturation. Ellen McCracken describes this shift as the rooting of Esperanza's “individual self in the broader socio-political reality of the Chicano community.” Instead of striking out by herself, leaving the provinces for the city, as protagonists in a traditional “Bildungsroman” would do, Esperanza learns of herself and her culture in great part through her connections with other people. In many ways, the Chicano community in her Chicago barrio serves as an extended family, and Esperanza learns about herself and her complex position as a working-class Chicana in the urban United States through the stories of her neighbors. Many chapters in the novel narrate incidents in the lives of others and constitute some of the “experiences” that shape Esperanza and her maturation.

Scanning the chapter titles (over half of which refer to other characters) shows this emphasis on other members of the community. We see this practice of learning from others in a chapter Cisneros places early on in the text, “My Name.” From the title, it seems that the chapter will focus on Esperanza, but it does so only indirectly. What we really get in this chapter is the story of

Esperanza's great-grandmother, her namesake, a woman who was “a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that.” The experience of her great-grandmother, who “looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow,” seems to be common for Chicanas, as we see this image of women imprisoned within the domestic sphere by husbands or fathers, confined within the frame of a window, reiterated throughout the novel. Esperanza, however, learns from these experiences and is able to avoid this fate in her own maturation.

The importance of community for Esperanza—of finding out where one belongs and making a space for oneself; realizing that she does indeed belong on Mango Street and to her Chicano community after all—is crucial. Cisneros demonstrates this through the image of the “four skinny trees” Esperanza looks at outside her window whenever she is “too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks.” Cisneros directly connects these trees to Esperanza, and their physical form resembles the narrator's pre-pubescent, adolescent body: “They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here.” These trees with which Esperanza identifies extol strength through interdependence and the importance of community and (human) contact. Their will is “violent” and their “ferocious” roots (ties to the land, the community) are the key to their survival: “Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass.” The presence of four trees precludes reading the image as anything other than a representation of community and its importance for ethnic Americans. Three trees could be read as signifying the Holy Trinity, two trees as representing the importance of the heterosexual marriage bond (which Cisneros repeatedly exposes as destructive to women), and one tree, of course, as symbolizing the power of the lone, self-sufficient individual. Cisneros undermines all of these traditional supports (religion, marriage, and independence) and leaves the

reader with a clear image of the strength and necessity of interdependence. Thus, although the text narrates the ultimate development of one primary character, it counterbalances this liberation of the protagonist by continually reinforcing the need for community and demonstrating that it is through the recognition and appreciation of Chicano culture and community that this human development is possible.

Sandra Cisneros also yokes the repressed and dominant traditions through the formal elements of the text. Cisneros uses realism, but, instead of using a straight, linear narration to chart the chronological coming-of-age of the protagonist, she writes her Bildungsroman in a fragmented, episodic form. We learn of Esperanza (and of life in the Chicano barrio) through snippets, anecdotes, and often naively stated observations, which forces the reader to do what Esperanza must do—to make sense of these disjointed parts and fragments and construct them into a life, an experience, a narrative.

The fragmented form of the text is especially powerful when Cisneros relates the story of Geraldo, a young man who appears at a dance and later is killed in a hit-and-run accident. Geraldo is not mentioned in any of the subsequent vignettes; after a few pages we never hear of him again, just as his family "in another country" will never hear of him again. The episodic narration of Cisneros's re-evaluated Bildungsroman not only challenges the traditional, linear writing that valorizes one particular line of progress and stifles the alternative voices and experiences that abound in Cisneros's text, but it also underscores the transient, "insignificant" nature of the immigrant experience in American culture. Geraldo's tale is simply one migrant's experience in a vast, anonymous history of many.

We also see Cisneros's nonlinear writing style in the circular pattern of the text. Whereas the traditional Bildungsroman begins with the birth of the protagonist and proceeds chronologically until the point of maturation and assimilation into a larger society, Cisneros's novel ends virtually (but significantly not quite) where it began. Even after

the numerous displacements, Esperanza ultimately remembers Mango Street, the place where she began. Esperanza's journeying, both physical and psychological, does not cut a straight, linear path. In fact, Cisneros demonstrates that Esperanza's initial belief that she can "walk away" from her culture and her community is an illusion; she may leave temporarily (and Esperanza's friend Alicia doubts even this possibility), but she must return. Her maturation, like her text, eventually will leave Esperanza squarely where she began: on Mango Street. This revision of the American idealization of mobility is important because instead of signifying the freedom to journey and conjuring the image of forward-moving progress, Cisneros reinforces the importance of community and returning to the neighborhood that helped to shape her as a Chicana growing up in American society.

In fact, it is a set of figures who also occupy the space between dominant American culture and traditional Mexican culture that impresses upon Esperanza the very necessity of this return to Mango Street: the three sisters, "las comadres," who appear near the close of the work and resemble the mythological Fates, who offer Esperanza the most important advice she receives. These women give her strategies for survival as well as knowledge of herself, and they remind her not to forget about the rest of the women in her community. The appearance of las comadres also signals a shift away from traditional paternal/maternal sources of guidance to a communal one. The three aunts repeatedly utter Esperanza's name, calling it "a good, good name." The narrator, however, tells us at the beginning of the novel that her name is ambivalent, signifying hope in English and longing or lack in Spanish. We realize that these are precisely the two elements that Esperanza must integrate in her development: the hope and ability to break out of the cycle of poverty and oppression Chicanas often experience from both dominant American society and patriarchal Chicano society, and the memory/longing of the other women "who cannot leave as easily." When the two definitions are amalgamated, the complete, complex process of development for the protagonist becomes clear.