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## Title:

[(essay date 1995) *In the following essay, Sanchez contends that the narrator of The House on Mango Street Remembering Always to Come Back: The Child's Wished-for Escape and the Adult's Self-Empowered Return in Sandra Cisneros's House on Mango Street* rejects

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## Author(s):

*the traditional patriarchal myths of the home while celebrating the*

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"homelessness" in children's literature, Virginia L. Wolf suggests that one distinction between literature for children and literature for adults may be that the former tends to embrace myth while the latter tends to embrace reality. "Whereas much adult literature laments our homelessness and reflects the

Critical essay

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fragmentation or loss of

myth, most children's literature celebrates home and affirms belief in myth" (54). In doing so, however, children's literature might very well offer an unrealistic view of the world: "Even though I celebrate all those wonderful mythic houses in children's literature as an invaluable legacy of comfort, I worry that they deny too much of reality. Certainly, if children are to reach their potential and make their contribution to humanity, they must eventually move beyond a perception of the world as they desire it to be and accept it as it is--enormously destructive, turbulent, and chaotic as well as creative and peaceful" (66). Though children find myth attractive, they might nonetheless acquire a distorted "perception of reality" should the book emphasize myth--or if myth and reality are irreconcilable. Wolf's distinctions between myth and reality and between literature for children and literature for adults are crucial to scholars who wish to fashion a hermeneutics of discourse concerning children's literature. But as one might expect, the practice of literary interpretation could render such distinctions problematic in certain texts.

The foremost proponent of archetypal criticism, Northrop Frye, describes the structure of the monomyth in historical terms as a movement in Western literature from primitive myth to modern irony, a schema that does much to subordinate myth to irony. Frye's rigorous schema has since been critiqued by historicists, structuralists, post-structuralists, and feminists, but there nonetheless remains a tendency in literary studies to view myth as the opposite of reality. Such a tendency might limit the appeal, perhaps the usefulness, of texts that are said to be mythic. For the purposes of this essay, however, I should like to consider myth in the sense that Joseph Campbell defines it in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*: "It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth" (3). Campbell's definition blurs the distinction between myth and irony, which allows us to recognize how and why myth moves us and is useful to us, adults and children alike. Through story telling the writer's perception of the world is manifested. We might think of myth, therefore, as cultural story telling, a way by which the writer who belongs to and identifies with a particular community explains why the world is the way it is, from the point of view of that particular community. The writer either validates a myth, or modifies a myth without rejecting it, or rejects a myth and creates a new myth based on his or her own experience. In *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros participates in the third type of story telling by combining myth (home) and irony (homelessness) in her depiction of life in the barrio as seen through the eyes of a girl.

Cisneros addresses the theme of home versus homelessness in a series of forty-four vignettes--some as short as a few paragraphs, others as long as four or five pages--written in a language that is easily accessible and in a style that is sophisticated in its presentation of voice and theme. There is no single narrative strand, though the vignettes are loosely connected to each other in that they concern a brief period in which Esperanza, the book's protagonist, lives on Mango Street. We are never told her age, but she seems to be about ten or eleven years old. She wishes to find a house of her own:

Not a flat. No 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)

This type of story telling incorporates both extremes--home contrasted with homelessness, the ideal house contrasted with the realistic, harsh surroundings--into a larger myth concerning the child's perception of her world and her rejection of the patriarchal myth that would prevent her from finding a house of her own. To free her protagonist of one myth, Cisneros must create another myth.

Esperanza recognizes the reality of her own homelessness, for she points out that until they move into the house on Mango Street her family has lived in several different houses; on Mango Street she continues to wish for her ideal house, a wish that initiates and concludes the narrative, the narrative thus ending with a type of return, a tradition in children's literature. There is closure to the narrative in the repetition of a specific passage at the end of *The House on Mango Street*. At the beginning Esperanza states, "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot" (3). Near the end she reiterates, "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to" (109-110). What Esperanza adds to the second passage evinces her discovery that although what she remembers *initially* is moving often, what she remembers *finally* is Mango Street. The addition to the second passage suggests that there has been a change in Esperanza from the beginning to the end of her story telling, where her concern is with a particular neighborhood and a particular house, to which she vows she will return.

The closure resulting from the narrative circling back on itself by means of repetition can also be described as an example of Freud's *fort da* idea, *fort* meaning "gone away" and *da* meaning "here."<sup>1</sup> Once the reading process has been completed, the reader recognizes how and why the beginning and the end depend upon one another. As Terry Eagleton points out: "*Fort* has meaning only in relation to *da*" (186). Although repetition suggests closure, the narrative, in fact, is not self-enclosed; rather, it is open-ended and encourages the reader to consider what will become of Esperanza after the book has ended.

Margaret Higonnet has suggested that in "its ideological functions of social control" children's literature is an "imperialist form," but that the form is artistic as well as ideological (37-38). Because children's literature is often characterized by repetition and a firm sense of closure, even predictability in that closure, any deviation from that form results in a narrative fragment or rupture--an artistic deviation that involves the child reader in the process of giving meaning to the text. Higonnet describes two types of fragments: the *mosaic* is a gap within the story, which the child reader must fill in; the *sherd* is a gap at the end of the story, which compels the child reader to supply an ending for the (incomplete) story after the narrative itself has concluded. Higonnet argues, "A somewhat older audience permits an author to use the sherdlike fragment not only to evoke threatening subjects but to provoke the reader's conscious activity. The most interesting type of fragment, then, may be that which deliberately propels the reader into responsibility for the *unwritten* narrative conclusion" (49). The sherdlike fragment applies to the ending of *The House on Mango Street*. Although the book has closure, it is also open-ended in that it does not tell us whether Esperanza finds her ideal house. Essential to the didactic quality of the text, however, is the lesson that if Esperanza does indeed escape Mango Street, and we cannot help but believe she will, she must return "for the others." In her depiction of the reality of homelessness and the myth of home, Cisneros shows how and why dialectic--homelessness/home, irony/myth, escape/return--influences Esperanza's growing awareness of who she is and what her ideal house means to her. But the unique *fort da* quality of the narrative leaves the outcome of that search for the ideal house unresolved for the child/adult reader.

By the end of the narrative, Esperanza recognizes that she must someday "return" to Mango Street empowered as a writer. Cisneros was raised in Chicago and, like Esperanza, in her writing returns to the barrio. Although Cisneros is writing fiction, there are nonetheless parallels between Cisneros and Esperanza. In her autobiographical essay "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession," Cisneros tells that hers was a large family (six brothers and her parents) living in small apartments, the family traveling often between Chicago and Mexico (69). Like her protagonist (who also comes from a large family--three brothers, a sister, and parents), Cisneros has learned to write about "the ones who cannot out" (110), which implies a tie not only between narrator Esperanza and the characters within the fictional narrative but also between writer Cisneros and the readers of the text. In writing about Esperanza's childhood,

Cisneros, as Aidan Chambers would say, writes "on behalf of adolescence" (199). Chambers argues that writers who reject "the adult exploitation of youth" instead write "on behalf of a state of life that still lives inside you, even though you are past the age when it is the socially evident and psychologically pertinent expression of your existence" (199).

The return of the writer--Esperanza and Cisneros--to her childhood is symbolized by the mythic image of the circle, a symbol both of the circular journey she as a writer must take when remembering and writing about her childhood, and of the circle that binds "las Mujeres/the Women," to whom the book is dedicated, *within* and *outside* the narrative. The child's wished-for escape and the adult's self-empowered return comprise the fort da quality of a narrative that is, in its sherdlike conclusion, incomplete.

In the vignette "**The Three Sisters**," which comes near the end of the book, Esperanza is instructed about what leaving and returning means. At the wake of a child, "Lucy and Rachel's sister," Esperanza meets "las comadres," three old women whom she finds very mysterious. The Spanish word *comadre* is a term that mother and godmother use to refer to each other; it could also be the term women friends who are not related use to address each other. But the word possesses other connotations as well. In New Mexico, for example, La Comadre Sebastiana (or Doña Sebastiana, as she is also known) is the skeletal image of Death seated on *la carreta de la Muerte* (the death cart) in Penitente processions. Penitentes (penitents) are a lay brotherhood of Roman Catholics who observe rituals associated with the passion of Christ. Since the image of La Comadre Sebastiana seems exclusive to New Mexico, Cisneros may not have this specific image in mind in her presentation of las comadres. Yet, the aura of death surrounds these three women; one might say that, like La Comadre Sebastiana, the three sisters are intended to remind us of death:

They came with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed. Three who did not seem to be related to anything but the moon. One with laughter like tin and one with eyes of a cat and one with hands like porcelain. The aunts, the three sisters, *las comadres*, they said. The baby died. Lucy and Rachel's sister. One night a dog cried, and the next day a yellow bird flew in through an open window. Before the week was over, the baby's fever was worse. Then Jesus came and took the baby with him far away. That's what their mother said.(103)

The vignette is about death, but it is also about life. It concerns the beginning--or, in mythic terms, the birth--of Esperanza's recognition of what it will mean to return to her past.

The three sisters sense that Esperanza wants to leave Mango Street, wants to leave the barrio. "When you leave you must remember always to come back," one of las comadres tells her. But la comadre emphasizes that there is more to it than simply coming back:

When you leave you must remember 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. Then I didn't know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish. You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused.(105)

The thrice-repeated injunction to come back for the others emphasizes for the child the lesson to be learned, but it also focuses the reader's attention on the central issues in *The House on Mango Street*: why Esperanza must leave, and how and why she must return. Esperanza feels "ashamed for having made such a selfish wish," although the injunction does not imply that her wish to escape Mango Street is selfish. Rather, la comadre instructs Esperanza to "return," instructs her to "remember." The return will not necessarily be literal but rather symbolic, described as a circle. As of yet Esperanza is "a little confused," but the implications of this injunction will soon be clear to her.

In "**Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps**," the vignette following "**The Three Sisters**," Alicia repeats la comadre's injunction to Esperanza, though more emphatically: "Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too" (107). Esperanza is identified with, is bound to, her neighborhood. Indeed, she *is* Mango Street, as the young woman (Alicia) and the old woman (la comadre) point out to her. Esperanza finds little if any comfort in the recognition that she is bound to Mango Street. Nor can she find comfort in the prospect of returning. She declares that she will not return, "Not until somebody makes it better." "Who's going to do it?" asks Alicia. "The mayor?" (107). The very thought of the mayor making it better seems funny to Esperanza. She must learn that *she* will have to make it better--by remembering her past and writing about it.

Esperanza learns that she must not leave simply to find a house on a hill in another part of town. She must "remember to come back for the others," and thereby come back for herself. The path she will take as writer is circular: Leaving to come back to leave again, and so

on.

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Lissa Paul suggests that the restriction of the child or the woman to the home is a common theme in literature, but that the significance of that restriction is only now being recognized: "Because women and children generally have to stay at home without the affairs of state to worry about, their stories tend to focus on the contents of their traps, the minute and mundane features of everyday life around which their lives revolve: household effects, food, clothes, sewing, interior decorating, and nuances of social relationships. These homely details have been redeemed by feminist critics ... as having interest; as being as worthy for critical attention as descriptions of battles or card games or beer drinking" (151). By focusing on such details and recognizing their significance for the protagonist, feminist critics articulate the "physical, economic, and linguistic entrapment" in which the heroine finds herself. Paul argues that whereas the hero traditionally relies upon *forza* (violence) in his quest, the "survival tactic" the heroine traditionally relies upon to free herself is *froda* (fraud): "Though deceit is the traditional tactic of the heroine, it is most visible in the tactics of defenceless child protagonists in children's literature" (154). This survival tactic is one way that the "difference" or "otherness" can be seen between the male and the female, the adult and the child. That difference is also being recognized as relevant to all readers: "The quickening of academic interest in women's and children's literature testifies that something in their stories is in touch with the temper of our time. Trickster stories express a contemporary reality; powerlessness is no longer a condition experienced primarily by women, children and other oppressed people. It is a condition we all recognize" (153). Powerlessness is of course Esperanza's condition, and she is in danger of remaining powerless. Showing why the female is powerless enables Cisneros to offer a way by which her protagonist may empower herself. Esperanza learns that she can empower herself through "books and paper"--a form of "deceit" in that books and paper enable her to "subvert" the "physical, economic and linguistic traps in women's and children's literature" (Paul 155).

Why Esperanza wishes to escape Mango Street and how and why she must return are the issues Cisneros addresses by means of the home versus homelessness theme. In doing so, she has created a narrative account of "a condition we all recognize"--a narrative, further, accessible to both the adult reader and the child reader. Esperanza wants to escape Mango Street, wants a house of her own, but unlike her male counterparts in other works she does not escape to the pastoral world. Chicanas usually choose to write about female characters in urban settings, whereas Chicanos usually choose to write about male characters in pastoral settings or in either pastoral or urban settings (sometimes moving freely between both settings). Although the choice of setting may not strictly depend upon gender, there does seem to be a tendency among Chicanos to allow their male characters the freedom to move about in the city or in the country or both, whereas there seems to be a tendency among Chicanas to restrict their female characters to movement within the neighborhood, or the house.

The pastoral traditionally concerns the urban poet's praise of nature and the simple life of the shepherd, in contrast with the complicated life of the city dweller. Though seemingly unaffected by the problems typically found in the city, the pastoral is not always and simply utopian, for there are conflicts the protagonist must face. In American literature one might even consider why the writer uses a particular version of the pastoral as a setting: uncontrolled nature (forests, rivers, plains), or controlled nature (fields, pastures, gardens, orchards). These two versions of the pastoral are found in, for example, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, where the young protagonist Antonio is torn between the *llano* (the plain, representing his father's side of the family) and *Las Pasturas* (the pastures, representing his mother's side of the family). Although his family lives outside the small town, the town is nonetheless a significant factor in that it represents sources of conflict for Antonio.

Often, the male protagonist's movement from the urban to the pastoral may serve only as a momentary escape from the harshness of the urban, the protagonist eventually returning to face his troubles in the city. Or the pastoral itself may be threatening to the protagonist. In works by Chicanos, the pastoral is apropos as well to the search for the mythical Aztlan, the search for what Aztlan symbolizes.<sup>2</sup>

The Chicana's concern with "place"--a house, or a room of one's own--is a reaction against the patriarchal myth that denies the Chicana a place of her own. Whereas the Chicano is free to journey through the mountains or the cities, the Chicana's movement has often been restricted by the Chicana writers themselves.<sup>3</sup> The reality the Chicana addresses, then, is the reality of her restriction to the urban setting--particularly the house or the room. That setting is Esperanza's past and her present in *The House on Mango Street*;

she recognizes that it might very well be her future as well.

Instead of wishing to escape to the pastoral, Esperanza wants her house to be in another part of town:

One 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. The attic grumble. Rats? they'll ask. Bums, I'll say, and I'll be happy. (87)

Her vision of an escape is to a house on a hill, far away from Mango Street but still in the city. Some of the visitors she will receive will not be from the utopian world of the pastoral but from the realistic world of the barrio. The passage is a poignant and gently humorous reminder of the significance of the home versus homelessness theme in this book.

Yet, the passage has also drawn criticism. Ramon Saldivar states, for example: "Incapable of imagining a house without rats in the attic, and naively accepting the derogatory epithet 'bums' for all street people, the child innocently combines the features of a cognac advertisement with a scene from a shelter for the homeless" (184). Saldivar might be distinguishing between Esperanza's naivete and Cisneros's maturity, might not be criticizing Cisneros per se. Although a concern with the protagonist's naivete might be relevant to children's literature, Saldivar's concern seems more ideological than literary. In many children's books the young protagonist seems naive, but can also seem sophisticated for her years. Recall Alice, Dorothy, Bobbie (Roberta from *The Railway Children*), Jo March, Mary Lennox, Meg Murray, Lucy Pevensie, and a host of princesses from fairy tales.

Esperanza's use of the word *bums* is derogatory only from the adult reader's perspective--perhaps an example of "the adult exploitation of youth." The negative implication of the word is not indicative of Esperanza's attitude toward the homeless. That is, if she "naively" uses a derogatory term, she certainly does not have a derogatory attitude toward the homeless. (On the other hand, her use of the term "Bum man" in the vignette "**The Family of Little Feet**" is intended to be derogatory because of the sexual threat the man poses to Rachel and to the others.) Esperanza declares that she will give the homeless shelter and will care for them because she identifies with their plight: "I know how it is to be without a house." If they are homeless, she implies, then so is she. The word *bums* should perhaps be understood more properly in its specific context in the story and by means of criteria appropriate to the literary text.

A much harsher view of Esperanza--and, by extension, Cisneros--is expressed by Juan Rodriguez in his review of *The House on Mango Street*. Like Saldivar, Rodriguez faults Esperanza for wanting a particular type of house: "That Esperanza chooses to leave Mango St., chooses to move away from her social/cultural base to become more 'Anglicized,' more individualistic; that she chooses to move from the real to the fantasy plane of the world as the only means of accepting and surviving the limited and limiting social conditions of her barrio becomes problematic to the more serious reader" (quoted in Olivares 168). The literary value of *The House on Mango Street* is thus suspect for Rodriguez, but his conclusions seem based on whether Cisneros espouses a particular political ideology. Rodriguez does not recognize that Cisneros's text is political *and* serious in that she writes about oppression (political, economic, sexual) and the way her protagonist might free herself from that oppression. Her politics just do not happen to be his politics. Of the significant distinctions to be made between Chicano narrative and Chicana narrative, one might thus distinguish in terms of politics. The intention, however, should be to understand as fully and clearly as possible both the politics and the manner in which the politics is presented. Even Saldivar's critique of Esperanza's politically incorrect use of the word *bums*--Esperanza's politics, if you will--does little to clarify this distinction, since his overall treatment of Chicana narratives is rather brief (one twenty-eight-page chapter, six pages of which are devoted to Cisneros's book) in comparison to his overall treatment of Chicano narratives (six chapters).

Conclusions that the word *bums* is derogatory and indicative of Esperanza's naivete and that Esperanza's desire to escape her environment shows that she (with Cisneros) lacks political commitment serve as examples of what can happen when one does not evaluate a literary text on its own terms and on the terms appropriate to the genre, when one complains instead of analyzes. If we prefer complaint to analysis, we may miss the significant points made in the vignette "**Bums in the Attic**": Esperanza will not give up her dream; she will not forget "those who cannot out"; she will not forget who she is; she will find a house of her own.

The dangers critics like Saldivar and Rodriguez risk when they evaluate the work of a writer like Cisneros are similar to the dangers adults risk when they attempt to evaluate children's literature according to criteria they may bring with them from their work in other

genres or other disciplines. The criteria by which one evaluates literature for children is often, and perhaps unavoidably, at least in part the same criteria by which one evaluates literature for adults. "Whatever the topic to be studied," Margaret Meek argues,

in literature, as elsewhere, we inherit the theories of our predecessors, willy nilly; and in making our own we are bound to represent not only their earlier methods of inquiry, but also the pattern of associated constructs already existing in our own minds. Thus, I cannot speculate about children's literature without incorporating the tissues of ideas that inform my everyday thinking about literature, children, reading, writing, language, linguistics, politics, ideology, sociology, history, education, sex, psychology, art, or a combination of some or all of these, to say nothing of joy or sadness, pleasure or pain. This is a lengthy way of saying that those who would theorize do so initially about themselves. (166-167)

We cannot, therefore, help but evaluate children's literature according to what we have learned from our predecessors and according to our personal tastes. Yet as Meek reminds us: "In the past 20 years, we have outgrown the need to establish children's books as a legitimate area of study, but we are still looking through the lorgnettes of critical models now outworn in adult literature" (167). Theorizing of course enables us to articulate the value of children's literature or of Chicana literature; but as we have seen, theorizing that is not based on close literary analysis or that is not based on an appreciation of genre can lead to the subordination of these literatures for political reasons.

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Cisneros addresses the home versus homelessness theme in an urban rather than pastoral setting. In the vignette "The Monkey Garden," she shows why the pastoral must be rejected—a rejection, certainly, of the pastoral image of Eden, perhaps a postlapsarian vision of Eden, for this garden is overgrown *and* decaying. The urban world has overtaken the pastoral world in that the garden becomes a junk yard where "Dead cars appeared overnight like mushrooms" (95).<sup>4</sup> In the garden, too, Esperanza, brick in hand, realizes that Sally does not want to be "saved" from "Tito's buddies." This realization results in a form of self-expulsion in that Esperanza now feels she no longer belongs in the garden: "I looked at my feet in their white socks and ugly round shoes. They seemed far away. They didn't seem to be my feet anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn't seem mine either" (98). It is time, she senses, for her to leave the garden and what it represents. She is changing, outgrowing that which kept her in the garden until now, and she expresses that awareness through a reference to her feet and shoes—one of many references to feet and shoes in Cisneros's book. Others may be found, for example, in "**The Family of Little Feet**" and "**Chanclas**" (a *chancla* is a type of slipper or old shoe), vignettes concerned with the confusion involved in the transition from childhood to adolescence.

Cisneros presents the image of the garden in order to reject it. Any attempt to return to an edenic past would be ironic for the female who seeks freedom from the patriarchal Genesis myth. Though Esperanza may not fully understand why, she nonetheless feels that she no longer belongs in the garden: "Who was it that said I was getting too old to play the games?" (96). Nor does she require a deity to evict her. The theme of exile from the garden—the recognition and rejection of what the garden represents—is specifically related to the home versus homelessness theme: the home Cisneros rejects is the patriarchal, edenic home.

The rejection of the patriarchal home has become an important theme in Chicana literature. For example, Estela Portillo Trambley also critiques the patriarchal myth in her short story "The Trees." Nina, "a confident city girl," marries the youngest of four sons of Don Teofilo Ayala, the head of a family that owns a large and very productive apple orchard. When the old patriarch dies, Nina worries about how the orchard will be divided among the brothers. She wishes to acquire the inheritance for herself and for her husband, Ismael (a name reminiscent of exile). By turning the brothers against each other, Nina eventually brings about the destruction of *that* garden—because she is greedy, to be sure, but also because she is opposed to the patriarchal world of which she is a victim. She was raped when she was a child; and as an adult she is expected to play the role of submissive housewife: "The family, with its elementary tie to the earth, had established a working patriarchal order. The father and sons lived for a fraternal cause, the apple orchards. Their women followed in silent steps, fulfilled in their women ways. If ambition or a sense of power touched the feminine heart, it was a silent touch. The lives were well patterned like the rows of apple trees and the trenches that fed them. Men and women had a separate given image until Nina came" (13). Although Portillo Trambley does not justify Nina's destructive behavior or encourage the reader to sympathize with Nina, she nonetheless shows how the patriarchal order can, through its obsessive adherence to a "fraternal cause," bring about its own destruction. After all, Nina is "an avenging angel come to the Garden of Eden" (16). In her critique of the Eden myth Portillo Trambley makes her protagonist, as Hamlet would say, both "scourge and minister." Like Cisneros, Portillo Trambley presents the patriarchal

image of the garden to show why it must not only be rejected but also destroyed. This metaphorical significance of rejection/destruction is fundamental to Cisneros's handling of the home versus homelessness theme: Esperanza understands that she must assert her independence if she is to find "A house all my own" (108).

In the vignette "**Beautiful & Cruel**," Esperanza declares that she will rebel against the traditional role expected of her by acting like a man: "I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (89). Yet, only three vignettes later in "**Red Clowns**," which immediately follows "**The Monkey Garden**," Esperanza becomes a victim. She goes with Sally to the carnival, where Sally goes off with a boy and leaves Esperanza alone. What happens next is not clear, but it appears that Esperanza is raped, or if she is not, the experience is just as traumatic:

Sally Sally a hundred times. Why didn't you hear me when I called? Why didn't you tell them to leave me alone? The one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn't let me go. He said I love you, Spanish girl, I love you, and pressed his sour mouth to mine. Sally, make him stop. I couldn't make them go away. I couldn't do anything but cry. I don't remember. It was dark. I don't remember. I don't remember. Please don't make me tell it all.(100)

The pattern seems similar to what happens to Nina; however, Esperanza will diverge from that pattern, we assume, for only two vignettes after "**Red Clowns**" Esperanza meets las comadres in the vignette "**The Three Sisters**." Esperanza will destroy the male myth, not by literally destroying the garden as Nina does, but by becoming a writer and writing about her past.

Cisneros's critique of patriarchal society--the forms of power through which it protects its "fraternal cause"--and her reaction against that society are evident through much of the book. The critique and the reaction are examples of what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as "writing" that is "dangerous": "Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared" (171). Esperanza seeks to possess this kind of power. In the vignette "**My Name**" she declares that "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (10). Although she has inherited her grandmother's name, Esperanza will not "inherit her place by the window" (11). Instead, she will "baptize" herself "something like Zeze the X," a name whose very sound conjures resistance, a cacophonous name that she feels will help her assert her power to avoid her grandmother's fate. Esperanza decides "not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" ("**Beautiful & Cruel**" 88). Vowing to break away from what confines her makes Esperanza "dangerous" (a word Cisneros uses often in the book): "They are dangerous," Mr. Benny points out to Esperanza and her friends. "You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops, but we just run" ("**The Family of Little Feet**" 41). Sally, too, is considered dangerous because of the type of clothes and shoes she wears, as Esperanza says to her: "I like your black coat and those shoes you wear, where did you get them? My mother says to wear black so young is dangerous, but I want to buy shoes just like yours, like your black ones made out of suede, just like those" ("**Sally**" 82). Esperanza is fascinated by what is deemed dangerous.

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Throughout *The House on Mango Street*, the many references to children's literature are evidence of that genre's impact on Cisneros. In "**Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession**," Cisneros tells of books and fairy tales that were especially significant to her as a child. One such book was Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House*, which "was my own dream. And I was to dream myself over again in several books, to reinvent my world according to my own vision" (71). She mentions such favorite fairy tales as "Six Swans" and "Ugly Duckling," as well as the *Doctor Dolittle* series, *The Island of Blue Dolphins* series, the Alice books, and *Hitty: Her First 100 Years*, this last book being "a century account of a wooden doll who is whisked through different homes and owners but perseveres" (71). One can easily see, then, how the adult writer indeed writes "on behalf of adolescence."

In certain instances in *The House on Mango Street*, the references to children's literature also serve as metonyms through which Cisneros develops the home versus homelessness theme and the rejection of the patriarchal myth theme. For example, in the vignette "**Edna's Ruthie**," Esperanza tells how she had memorized "The Walrus and the Carpenter" from *Through the Looking-Glass*, and one day recited it to Ruthie, a friend, "because I wanted Ruthie to hear me" (69). In Tweedledee's poem the unsuspecting oysters are tricked and then eaten by the walrus and the carpenter. Esperanza's selection of this story is not accidental, as it bears special relevance to her vow not to be overpowered by the society in which she lives--her vow, that is, "not to grow up tame like the others who

lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (88).

Besides the Alice books, there is another text that Cisneros uses in her characterization of Ruthie. Esperanza describes Ruthie's whistling as "beautiful like the Emperor's nightingale" (68). This fairy tale serves as a metonym of the world in which Ruthie and Esperanza live. In Andersen's "The Nightingale," the emperor, one of the last people in his realm to know about the nightingale, finally recognizes and appreciates the beauty of its song. He cages the nightingale, however, so that it can sing only for the court. An artificial nightingale is later manufactured and brought to the court, which results in the loss of interest in the live nightingale; no one notices when the nightingale escapes back to the forest. But when the artificial nightingale breaks and the music is gone, the emperor begins to grow weak. With Death sitting on his chest and the demons of his past surrounding the emperor, the nightingale returns from the forest and rescues him through the beauty of its song. The nightingale then agrees to come and sing for him from time to time, though the emperor must promise not to tell anyone.

According to Esperanza—who perhaps got it from Ruthie herself—Ruthie was married and left Mango Street only to be forced to return and live with her mother: "She had lots of job offers when she was young, but she never took them. She got married instead and moved away to a pretty house outside the city. Only thing I can't understand is why Ruthie is living on Mango Street if she doesn't have to, why is she sleeping on a couch in her mother's living room when she has a real house all her own, but she says she's just visiting and next weekend her husband's going to take her home. But the weekends come and go and Ruthie stays" (69). Of course, Ruthie does not have "a real house all her own," and that is Cisneros's point. Like Andersen's nightingale, Ruthie is caged and ignored. For example, if she was indeed married, then she is ignored by her husband. Nor does her mother seem to show much affection for her: "Once some friends of Edna's came to visit and asked Ruthie if she wanted to go with them to play bingo. The car motor was running, and Ruthie stood on the steps wondering whether to go. Should I go, Ma? she asked the grey shadow behind the second-floor screen. I don't care, says the screen, go if you want. Ruthie looked at the ground. What do you think, Ma? Do what you want, how should I know? Ruthie looked at the ground some more. The car with the motor running waited fifteen minutes and then they left" (68). The image of Ruthie is of a female literally trapped and unable to escape Mango Street, to escape "her mother's living room," for that matter. Ruthie is only one of many symbols in *The House on Mango Street* of the trapped female.

For Esperanza, there is something at once sad and beautiful about Ruthie. Like Andersen's nightingale, Ruth is much admired and loved because she is undemanding and unselfish. She "sees" beauty and, for Esperanza, she possesses beauty: "Ruthie sees lovely things everywhere. ... When we brought out the deck of cards that night, we let Ruthie deal. ... We are glad because she is our friend" (68-69). Interpreting the allusions to stories by Dodgson and Andersen enables us to understand the themes Cisneros addresses through the characterization of Ruthie: the homelessness and the victimization of the female.

Ruthie loves books and says she "used to write children's books once," although now she seems unable to read (69), which suggests the possibility of losing the empowerment that comes through reading and writing. Books and paper give Esperanza the power to be dangerous and (possibly) to avoid Ruthie's fate.<sup>5</sup> She recognizes that through the power of books and paper she will make the prophecies of the old woman (la comadre) and of the young woman (Alicia) come true:

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. One day I will go away. 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.(110)

She says that she will leave and that she will come back. But these actions are beyond the confines of the narrative—a narrative fragment, that is, to be resolved by the reader.

Perhaps most important, the power Esperanza acquires through books and paper will give her the strength to return. This is the world of myth, but it is also the world of irony. Wolf makes a compelling argument for the distinction between children's literature and adult literature in terms of the myth/home-irony/homelessness dichotomies. But she also argues that in five books—Jarrell's *The Animal Family*, Norton's *The Borrowers*, Lively's *The House in Norham Gardens*, Fox's *One-Eyed Cat*, and Schlee's *Ask Me No Questions*—we can trace the movement from myth to irony. The five books "range in their portraits of houses from the romantic to the ironic" (Wolf 56). I suggest that this range may be seen specifically in *The House on Mango Street*.

Mango Street is a place where Esperanza may have at times felt joy and a sense of belonging, but it is also a place where she realizes that women are locked in their rooms by jealous and insecure husbands, a world in which there is violence, incest, and rape. She describes a harsh world from which she seeks escape, but a world to which she must return empowered as writer.

At the end of *The House on Mango Street* Esperanza recognizes, and Cisneros validates, the empowerment that comes through writing and remembering. Hence, the writer can find her freedom, can find her voice as writer, though she can only find that freedom and voice by honoring an injunction: You *will* come back, she is told. She may or may not go far away, but she will come back for herself and "for the others." Here, then, is yet another circle in the book that includes those outside the fictional narrative, those to whom the book is dedicated, and those who will read the book, thereby perpetuating the circular journey of the child/adult each time the text is read. There is indeed a circle that binds, that extends beyond the confines of the narrative to bind las mujeres. Dedicating her book "A las Mujeres/To the Women," Cisneros has come back "For the ones who cannot out." The book's dedication and the very last line of the book form a circle symbolic of remembering always to come back.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of Freud's fort da theory, see Terry Eagleton (185-186).

2. For example, though urban settings are significant in Rudolfo Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan* and in Miguel Mendez's *Peregrinos De Aztlan*, the pastoral remains the symbolic goal. That is, the pastoral image of Aztlan symbolizes the spiritual or psychological return to the place of origin, a paradise lost.

Though some works may not refer specifically to Aztlan, they nonetheless participate in a literary tradition concerning the protagonist's quest through the world of nature as symbolic of the struggle to find the self. Oscar Zeta Acosta's *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* involves Zeta's movement away from a city in California to the mountains of Idaho, to a city in Mexico, and finally back to a city in California (one finds a similar movement in Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, in the movement from Los Angeles to Acapulco and the mountains of Guerrero then back to Los Angeles). Ron Arias's *The Road to Tamazunchale* involves Fausto's fantasy of a movement away from Los Angeles to the mountains of Peru. Tomas Rivera's *Y No Se Lo Trago La Tierra* involves a year in the life of a young boy in the world of the migrant workers, a setting that occurs as well in Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers*. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* involves Antonio's movement through the sometimes dangerous and destructive pastoral of northern New Mexico. By no means exhaustive, this list is intended to suggest the tendency Chicano writers have of giving their male protagonists freedom of movement.

There are of course exceptions to the emphasis on the protagonist's journey through the pastoral. For example, Nash Candelaria's *Memories of the Alhambra* is set mainly in Los Angeles. Alejandro Morales' *The Brick People* and *Casas viejas y vino nuevo* are set in the barrios of large cities. Rolando Hinojosa's Klail City books are set in a small town along the Mexico-Texas border. Gary Soto's *Living up the Street* and Danny Santiago's/Daniel James's *Famous all over Town* are narratives set in cities, although some of Soto's stories have rural settings, and Santiago's/James's story involves Chato's journey from Los Angeles to rural/pastoral Mexico then back to Los Angeles.

3. One need only think of Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls*, Lucha Corpi's *Delia's Song*, Mary Helen Ponce's *Taking Control*, Helen Viramontes' *The Moths and Other Stories*, and Estela Portillo Trambley's *Trini*, a work that traces the protagonist's movement from rural/pastoral to urban. These and other examples are narratives that in one way or another place the protagonists in realistic urban environments. Anna Castillo's epistolary novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, does present protagonists who venture away from the city, though usually to other cities—from New York to San Francisco, or to the pyramids in Mexico, for example.

This concern with the urban experience is expressed not only in prose narratives but in Chicana poetry: For example, Lorna Dee Cervantes' *Emplumada*, Evangelina Vigil's *Thirty an' Seen a Lot*, Alma Villanueva's *Bloodroot and Mother, May I?*, Pat Mora's *Borders and Chants*, and the poetry of Corpi (*Palabras de mediodia/Noon Words*), Castillo (*Women Are Not Roses*), and Cisneros (*My Wicked, Wicked Ways*). Of course, the setting is not always as significant in poetry as it is in prose narratives, but when it is significant to a particular poem, it is often (though not always) an urban setting. For example, perhaps one of the most significant

Chicana poems in recent years is Lorna Dee Cervantes' "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," a poem about three women--the grandmother, mother, and granddaughter--who live in a house next to a California freeway.

4. Elements of the pastoral might be seen as well in the vignette "Four Skinny Trees"--trees surrounded by concrete, trees that cling to the soil, trees that symbolize Esperanza's struggle to survive.

5. For two insightful discussions concerning Esperanza's empowerment as writer, see Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective," and Julian Olivares, "Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and the Poetics of Space."

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