The Hidden Value of House and Home

An analysis of the social and physical setting in *The House on Mango Street*
Abstract
The goal of this essay is to establish what influence the social and physical setting in the novel *The House on Mango Street*, written by Sandra Cisneros, has on the value of house and home for the protagonist. The thesis of this essay is that the meaning and value of house and home, upon the discovery and acceptance of social identity, evolve and change from a negative and dependent impression to a positive and independent one for the protagonist. The analysis of the social and physical setting, based on close reading, helps to determine and monitor the value of home throughout the entire novel, including the final value of home to the protagonist.
Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................3
Background ................................................................................................................................... 5
Analysis ........................................................................................................................................... 9
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 17
Works Cited .................................................................................................................................. 19
Introduction

What is the meaning of home? The place which a person calls home is usually the place where he or she lives, but that does not guarantee a sense of belonging. A house is a physical or material home, while a “real home” may be seen as the psychological living space, where a person will feel that he or she belongs, or “a home in the heart”.

Historically, a home or domestic space often occupies the core of many novels, as it still does today. Many stories, especially of the middle-class are told by the white people, through the physical setting of a house. Kathy Mezei and Ciara Briganti point out that “[t]he middle-class household is indeed the stuff of fiction” (838), referring to John Lukacs’ observation that “domesticity, privacy, comfort, the concept of home and the family …are …principal achievements of the Bourgeois age” (qtd. in Mezei and Briganti 838), “he could well be referring to the subject matter in the novels by Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Elliot”(838). They also state that the house and architecture have “served as a foundational, powerful, and recurring analogues throughout the history of literary interpretation” (Mezei and Briganti 837). The literary function of the house has changed over time, and the emphasis is no longer mainly based on the middle-class white man´s stories, as it used to be. However, in contemporary fiction, and especially in fiction written by women of colour, such as The House on Mango Street, written by Sandra Cisneros, even though the idea of home has deviated from the bourgeois idea of a home, the home still remains as the core of many contemporary novels, regardless of class or race.

In The House on Mango Street, the house and home as well as the street are the centre of the novel. Not only is the title self-explanatory, but in fact all the themes such as innocence, hope, identity, gender and class in the book revolve around the symbol of home, in their own ways. With the narrator both opening and ending the novel with descriptions of “that house on Mango Street”, a circle of the tale of houses is created. At the end of the book, the story returns to the beginning with “we didn´t always live on Mango Street…” (Cisneros 3 &109), but at the end the meaning of these sentences actually differs from the beginning. The plot events that occur throughout the novel provide a good base for a close reading. Through analysing the physical and social setting, and reading the house and home as a symbol, we are able to follow the tales of the focalised character, Esperanza Cordero´s coming of age process and the events which occur in her own home and the homes of her neighbours.
Reading a house in a literary perspective entails much more than just paying attention to the physical setting or space in contemporary multi-cultured literature. Reading the novel through a lens of social criticism enhances the dynamics of social criticism, and in the case of this particular essay, gender roles, racism and class prejudice can be analysed. Previously, there were some standardised representations of architecture in literature, which mostly included stories of the middle and upper class white people and were based on how they lived.

In her article "The House (of Memory) on Mango Street: Sandra Cisneros's Counter-Poetics of Space", Karen W. Martin states that “Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetic of Spaces*, imagines ‘the house of dream-memory’,” (Martin 50) which highlight Witold Rybczynski’s “perspective and emphasizes the significance of dwelling places in the evolution of a literary imagination” (Mezei and Briganti 839). Even though the human imagination and consciousness requires “to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, its longing for home, its sickness for home (nostalgia)” (839), yet this only partially corresponds with Cisneros’s novel, since the house actually represents homelessness but not nostalgia.

However, while Bachelard “speaks of writing a room or reading a house,” (Mezei and Briganti 837) Pierre Bourdieu refers to “the house as a book in which is inscribed a vision and structure of society and the world” (qtd. in Mezei and Briganti 837), but as we gradually turn away from white male canonical literary works, how does this change of perspective influence our reading of house in contemporary literature? How do we understand “the inscribed vision and structure of society” (Mezei and Briganti 837) through this particular “book of house” in *The House on Mango Street*? Bourdieu’s idea of the house being a book which inscribes a vision of society and the world, seems to be more compatible with modern readings, and the reading of Cisneros, since the social and physical setting may reflect one another. The writings of ethnical minority authors often do not reflect or correspond to the classical imprints and statements, such as “the text’s notion of the house as a privileged, upper-middle-class space or those of elevated educational and socio-economic status”(Martin 50). For Cisneros, Bachelard’s idea of the home being intimate and private was totally irrelevant, for instance, the privacy and intimacy women experience in their own homes do not exist in *The House on Mango Street*. In fact, Chicana literature has proven to deconstruct...
Bachelard’s idea of home in many ways, (Martin 50) which shall be further elaborated in the analysis.

In his critical essay “A Home in the Heart”, Nicholas Sloboda points out that an analysis which discloses the embedded social criticisms behind the text is necessary to enable detailed observations of the material and psychological space of a house for the protagonist (82). It is through such observations we determine what social effect the house has on Esperanza. A home which does not provide comfort and safety and is replaced by a house which lacks privacy and filled with domestic violence in the ghetto, makes the protagonist turn away from her own culture. Another aspect is that Esperanza’s parents are quite absent throughout the story, which indicates her sense of rejection from her home, making her long for an escape from the barrio. For most children, home is what their parents make for them, but Esperanza feels the urge to find a space of her own, where she can write and help set the others free. The literary function of home in contemporary novels no longer only revolves around the middle-class whites, as mentioned, but it still serves as a key factor of telling the tale. This analysis of the social and physical setting in *The House on Mango Street* will allow the monitoring of change in function and value of the house and home to the protagonist. Tracking down this change throughout the novel will help my readers better understand how the protagonist’s social and living environment influences her idea of home and why the narrative technique of the novel may enhance this understanding.

This essay aims to analyse the physical and social setting of *The House on Mango Street* through the focalised character Esperanza Cordero, who narrates her coming-of-age story, as a Mexican-American girl, living in the urban barrios of Chicago. Being both the narrator and protagonist, Esperanza’s views offer a variety of readings, since she actually shifts her stance from time to time and comments on what she does. A child who evaluates her own behaviour is not commonly seen, and in this case, could we interpret this narrative construction as an indication that the implied author has intended to convey more social critique to the implied readers? My reading indicates that, while the value of “house” harbours oppression, resentment and is connected to a negative view, during the protagonist’s younger years, towards the end she develops a more positive sense of “home”, since it gradually transforms as she grows up, to a value of hope, freedom and independence, through planning a life goal of having her own home. This essay will argue that the meaning and value of house and home, upon the discovery and acceptance of social identity, evolve and
Ivy Fredriksson

change from a negative and dependent impression to a positive and independent one for the protagonist.

Background

In the past, coming-of-age stories in the United States literary canon were predominantly those written by heterosexual white males such as J. D. Salinger, John Fante, Mark Twain, Philip Roth etc. One may wonder as Dianne Klein did: “where are the stories of the others?”(Klein 21) The stories of females, ethnic Americans, homosexuals and women of colour, where are they and what differences or similarities would one find in those? Many writers who were previously kept silent are making their way to the market for publications and having their stories told (Klein 21).

Chicana literature is written by Mexican-American women, and their literature gained recognition as recently as the 70’s. Writers like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa have edited This Bridge Called My Back, which is an anthology written by women of colour (Modleski 199). Along with the “birth” of Chicana coming of age stories, new issues are brought to light, for instance an issue such as domestic violence which did not typically exist within this genre. The gender roles reflecting the patriarchal system deal explicitly with the theme of home and homelessness, which will be further discussed in the analysis. For the first time, the cries of Chicana women are being heard through their writing. The typical Chicana literature addresses and criticises social problem such as racism, class prejudice as well as the gender roles within the Mexican-American culture, therefore a Chicana protagonist like Esperanza, can be seen as triply marginalised by society, in her daily life (Klein 25).

Chicana writers often use Spanglish in their writing, like Cisneros does in The House on Mango Street. “Spanglish” is, in fact, recognised as a legitimate variation of Chicano English within the scale of “World Englishes.” (Betz 18) Using Spanglish can also been seen as a way of elaborating their culture, giving the Hispanic community a new sociocultural representation. This type of community, just as portrayed in the vignette “Mamacita”, who is about a new immigrant in the neighbourhood and how she “sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about here country” (Cisneros
Esperanza expresses a contrast between the English and Spanish linguistic culture, where she clearly associates the Spanish terms with negative connotations. For example her name means “hope” in English but “too many letters” in Spanish (Betz 19). Betz also points out how Esperanza “uses her dominant English language to convey reliability to her audience as a competent narrator” (20) and her willingness to “obtain a sense of belonging outside of her community.” (20) It is apparent that Esperanza is ashamed of her roots and home when she claims, “No, this isn´t my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I´ve lived here. I don´t belong. I don´t ever want to come from here” (106). The urge of her leaving Mango Street escalates and Esperanza continues to reject her own culture, until she finally comes to terms with who she really is and who she will always be.

Chicana feminism is a movement by writers who direct their political and social voices through their literary work, with politically charged images, raising awareness on issues such as racism and class prejudice. For instance, in The House on Mango Street, the protagonist is a young Chicana, who innocently tells her audience what she sees and experiences, gradually becoming aware of her own social identity. Sloboda points out that the cultural tension in the novel becomes apparent to Esperanza, when she “learns that the issue of a respectable house and neighbourhood is linked not only to people´s economic plight, but also to their cultural identity.”(84) Esperanza wants to escape as far away from the poor neighbourhood and the patriarchal system as possible, until she realises that she is inseparable from her culture and learns to negotiate with her situation. This essay will explore the process of how Esperanza finally comes to terms with her own reality, how she learns to accept her own culture and identify herself, which will offer her empowerment. Esperanza finally accepts her Hispanic identity and realises that being independent does not necessarily mean that she has to abandon her people or culture, instead she decides to come back for the ones who cannot leave.

Cisneros is considered, by many scholars and critics, as one of the canonical women of colour writers and a prominent Chicana feminist. As a Mexican-American writer who grew up in a poor urban barrio of Chicago, Cisneros says that she did not have a role model
Ivy Fredriksson

to teach her the value of her own cultural heritage and was often enough discouraged from writing (Klein 21). Cisneros tells her story of the lower social income class through the innocent voice and eyes of an adolescent girl, who almost re-lives those tales and memories from the author’s own life through her writing. Betz affirms this analysis of Cisneros’ method when she argues that “[t]he manner in which a person communicates suggests something about her identity in relation to ulterior motives, prospective audience, and ethnic background.” (Betz 18) Betz also comments on how Cisneros “is no exception to this affirmation within her first novel” (Betz 18), since her own life experiences are very much reflected in the story.

The protagonist “desires a space of her own, a real home with warmth and comfort and security” (Klein 23), feelings which she does not experience in her home. This coming of age novel is not typical of the genre, “unlike the traditional bildungsroman, the knowledge with which [the protagonist] emerges is not that of regeneration, but of painful knowledge, the knowledge of betrayal and physical violence” (Klein 25). For instance, when she was sexually assaulted by a few men while waiting for her friend who never actually came to her “rescue”, in the vignette “Red Clowns”. (Klein 25). The domestic and sexual violence which young girls in their adolescent age have to endure change Esperanza and make her move from her initial innocence to knowledge, as she learns to deal with the cruelty of her culture and living environment. Klein affirms this by pointing out that “Esperanza’s rites of passage speak not through myth and dreams, but through the political realities of Mango Street”, (Klein 25) which intersects with Harold Bloom’s claim that “what matters about this series of linked narratives is social testimony or the anguish of a young woman confronting the dilemmas of Mexican-American identity.” (Bloom 1)

Chicana culture expressed by literature is specific, in the sense that it may often mix a coming of age story with ethnical cultural issues. With Cisneros’s life experience being so closely related to the protagonist’s life, having a basic understanding of this culture does significantly enhance the close reading and analysis process. However, a successful analysis does not depend on correspondence between the author and the protagonist. In her essay, “A Space of Her Own”, Annie O Eusturoy also points out that “[i]n each story Esperanza narrates her own perception of her own sociocultural context, that is the barrio, its people, its conditions of life, with her immediate surroundings that brings about a gradual coming into consciousness about her own identity as a woman and as a Chicana” (61). It is through the awakening process of self-identity that the protagonist establishes who she is and where she
belongs. Upon recognition of her own culture, she knows that she is indeed a part of that culture which she once despises so much. After having identified herself, the protagonist has her finalised version of value regarding house and home. The analysis part will further explore this process. Unlike a typical coming of age story, as mentioned above, there is a constant co-existence of the innocence of a child versus the cruelty of life in her community, just as the theme of home versus homelessness, which appears to be rather contradictory and paradoxical.

Because *The House on Mango Street* can be read through many different literary critical lenses, it has already been discussed and reviewed by many literary critics and scholars. A variety of research materials are available in the academic database, and the critical topics may include: narrative, gender, culture, race, class, psychoanalysis etc. One of the most common discussions concerns ethnic feminist criticism. Why all this emphasis on Chicana culture in the on-going debates as well as in my essay? Jaqueline Doyle clearly states in her article “More Room of Her Own” that there is a difference between Virginia Woolf´s and Cisneros´s ideas of feminism in the sense that Woolf´s vision of “sisterhood” is totally rejected by many women of colour, with regards to race, culture and class. A colourless, classless feminism is only for the white women (6). In the current conversations, we hear repeated mentioning of the oppression of Chicana and entrapment within the patriarchal system and the sexual power struggle between the male and female role.

My specific contribution to the ongoing critical conversation on Cisneros is to claim that the narrator´s perception of home changes how she evaluates home and house, throughout the novel and that these changes can be read through the Chicana perspective. All of my readings of examples from the text will be read through a gender, class and race perspective to accurately reflect the main concerns of the text. For instance, Esperanza´s view of home is totally the opposite compared with the traditional representation theorised by Bachelard, where the home is supposed to be a comfortable “nesting spot” which offers safety and comfort, while it corresponds with Bourdieu´s idea of the house as a book inscribing the vision of society and the world around us.

**Analysis**

With the narrator and protagonist being the same person, as previously mentioned, Cisneros is able stay close to Esperanza and “gives voice to the ordinary experiences of a
young Chicana by letting her tell her own coming-of-age story, thus articulating the subjective experiences of the female ‘I´ who resists entrapment within sociocultural norms and expectations” (Eysturoy 61). This “voice” allows her to take different stances, and to look back at the plot events as a spectator, and as a result she is critical in her thinking throughout the book. For instance, although she is often engaged in the actions which she describes, she does evaluate them too. One other example is the scene in “Little Feet Family”, where the girls run away after taking off their high heels, and Esperanza actually comments that it was “enough of being beautiful”, suggesting her own disapproval of their own action. Naturally, close reading becomes easy through the eyes of the focal character of Esperanza, as Cisneros constructs a strategic role in her, and makes her readers interpret the scenes in the Hispanic ghetto through Esperanza´s description of her own experiences and her storytelling. In the beginning she uses the pronoun “we”, when she speaks about their dream home, but towards the end of the novel, she uses “I” mostly, which inflicts an automatic awareness of the importance of being independent from her parents and the rest of the community.

Also, the shifting between the different uses of pronouns also twists the tale a bit. When Esperanza uses “I”, she is exclusively referring to herself, but “we” sometimes changes to “they”, indicating her shifting of stance as a spectator and sometimes with the intention of separate herself from “their bad behaviour”. The narrative technique gives the readers more to read beyond the text. Readers make their own interpretations beyond the narrator´s own awareness, which will be essential to explore the central themes and symbols in this novel, house and home being one of them. The nature of the focal character´s ways of telling her stories enables the adult reader to further explore behind the text and make their own interpretations as the implied readers.

In addition, social codes and political images are woven into the innocent interpretations of an adolescent child, and through her eyes, it offers multiple readings for the adult reader. The vibrant energy of a child allows her to tell her story in such an artistic and occasionally playful way, that we may forget the serious nature behind the vivid scenes of her descriptions. For instance, the description of one of the Angel Vargas´ learning to fly experiences, where the narrator explains that she “dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an `oh’”(30). This incident is described almost in a joking and light-hearted manner, when in fact that child might have died from falling. The reason behind this incident is that Rosa Vargas simply has too many
children; she neither has the time nor the energy to care about all of them, whether they are busy hurting, killing themselves or not, it is almost as if she cannot care less. If we dig deeper in the text, she is probably depressed, living a hopeless life, after the father (or perhaps fathers) of her children leaves her. She is a victim of the gender culture of a patriarchal system, within the barrio, where a woman can hardly survive without a man in the family. This demonstrates the multiple readings offered to the implied readers, reading from the text, decoding the symbols of social criticism, in order to understand the meaning of words behind a culture and how the female role may be represented within this particular culture. The observation of Rosa Vargas’ situation, according to gender role analysis, indicates that at this stage we already have a sense of home being dependence and entrapment.

The house or home is evidently the core of this novel, since it begins with the description of the many houses that Esperanza’s family had lived in, which also informs the reader of their constant move and instability:

We didn’t always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we live on Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can’t remember. But what I remember the most is moving a lot. (3)

The constant moving reflects struggle and instabilities, in the sense that home does not appear to be a place of comfort or a nesting spot, as Bachelard once suggested and connected the “childhood memory house” to always be something positive, nostalgic and connected to a sense of belonging (Mezei and Briganti 839). On the contrary, both “having the landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom” and “using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons” echo the condition of a primitive and unstable domestic space, rendering neither safety nor privacy (3-4). Moreover, the condition of the previous house was so deteriorated, with broken water pipes, which the landlord had even refused to repair, since the house was too old. Although this time they no longer have to pay rent, or beware of being too noisy, and despite the fact that she acknowledges a slight improvement, Esperanza is still very disappointed, because this is the opposite of what her parents have been telling her. Subsequently, the physical setting described here directly reflects on the social setting of the urban Chicago barrio poverty, which corresponds with Bourdieu’s idea of the house being a book inscribing the vision of society and the world, this is “their world” of the barrio. Thus the historic romantic ideas of the home are demolished by
Cisneros´ ghetto description (Martin 51). Their home symbolises instability and struggle, due to the constant moving and deteriorated living condition as discussed above.

The ideal or “real” house will be fully equipped, furnished and functional with all the amenities which are essential for daily living. Necessities such as having running water and real stairs, just as the protagonist sees on television, are all probably considered as average for most of the middle-class American families. This aspect describes the Mexican-American family´s own version of the “American dream”. They move to America to make a better life for themselves, and this improvement of living conditions is accomplished through the process of changing homes, and until they would no longer have to move again, which would be one of the most significant milestones achieved.

The very beginning of the novel comes across as positive and promising for this immigrant family, but that changes almost simultaneously within the same vignette. The strong contrast and contradiction between that house on Mango Street and their “dream home”, further drifts Esperanza from her hopes, although her parents tell her that the house on Mango Street is only “for the time being” and “temporary”, [but] she “know[s] how those things go”(5). Nonetheless, the innocent child still would like to have hopes and dreams for their ideal home, but also learns to deal with reality and realise that it is unlikely to happen soon, which marks the first step in her coming of age process. The value of their home at this stage represents instability with discomfort and disappointment, but she still identifies home as being together with the rest of her family, since it will be their dream house when they eventually achieve their goal as a family.

However, the family dream house dream does not last for very much longer after they move into their current house, as the parents´ words have instantly become unreliable, and the strong contradiction between expectation and reality quickly awakens the child´s self-awareness as a social being and this in turn “provokes her own interpretation of the significance the households in her life” (Eysturoy 63). That ideal of white middle-class comfort versus poverty of the Hispanic barrio reality struck her to further evaluate her own social being, and her dream of the dream house begins to distort.

Moreover, Esperanza remembers an unpleasant and shameful encounter with a nun from her school, when they were living in Loomis; this incident makes Esperanza feel ashamed of where she lives and immediately identifies her home on Mango Street with poverty and humiliation, just like this bad memory. The value which that home represents
now is poverty, humiliation and degradation. The nun was passing by when Esperanza was playing outside her home, and the nun asked her where she lived:

Where do you live? She asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live there?

There. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the window so we wouldn’t fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded. (5)

As a result of the nun’s humiliation, this house on Mango Street is really starting to sound like bad news, and far from the comfortable and peaceful dwelling described by Gaston Bachelard. That bad memory of her encounter with the nun provokes Esperanza further to retaliate against her environment, since she knows by now that she has to have a house and it has to be a real house, one which she can point to, without feeling like nothing and humiliated. The house on Mango Street cannot satisfy this ambition. Also, on a different occasion, another nun in the school canteen humiliates Esperanza too, in a similar manner by assuming that she lives in some ugly flats that “even raggedy men are ashamed to go into.” (45) Esperanza is so embarrassed that she nods even if she knows that is not her home, she feels too shamed to speak up and starts to cry instead. Consequently, “[she always c[ries] when nuns yell[s] at [her], even if they’re not yelling (45); this humiliation further develops Esperanza’s resentment towards that house and that entire street, because for the people who do not live there, they are all the same.

In addition, Sloboda claims that “[t]hrough these seemingly innocent exchanges, Cisneros not only highlights the carelessness with which entire communities are negatively typified, but she exposes an irony, as Esperanza is repeatedly treated insensitively by someone who is supposed to be aware of the plight of the lower class and oppressed” (87), which echoes the social critical voice shouting out to their implied audience. Esperanza’s awareness of her “otherness” starts to grow with an identity recognition, and she starts to adapt different voices and perspectives when she speaks. Feeling like nothing made her feel disempowered and it sets her off in search of her own social identity, since she wants to establish an identity for herself which can do her proud. The prejudice almost crushes the
Ivy Fredriksson

little girl with a force that further progresses her coming of age process. The “our” home situation rapidly changes into “I” must have a home, as her sense of alienation is growing. Home and Mango Street now represent resentment, disempowerment, dependence and poverty.

Furthermore, Esperanza explores the home situation within her own social circle on Mango Street. She encounters more prejudice when she speaks to “Cathy Queen of Cats”, who agrees to befriend her for just a few days, until they move away. Esperanza learns that Cathy is moving away and will keep moving each time people like Esperanza’s family move in, hinting that the neighbourhood is deteriorating. Although this is not as confrontational as the incidents with the nuns, it is a softer critical voice projecting prejudice towards the Hispanics in the community, since Cathy is the only white person in that neighbourhood. Esperanza’s self-identification as a Hispanic girl is taking form and does not turn out to be a positive one.

Esperanza tends to associate her Hispanic heritage with negative connotations, when she says that her name means “hope” in English, but in Spanish, it means “too many letters”, “sadness” and “waiting”. She clearly disapproves her Hispanic heritage, by only referring to English as being positive (Betz 19). Esperanza then tells the story of her great-grandmother, from whom she inherits her name. The description of them both being born in the Chinese year of the horse is supposed to be bad luck, but she is sure that it must be a Chinese lie, since “the Chinese like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.” This is the first notion of Esperanza becoming aware of gender roles, as she proceeds to inform the audience how her great-grandmother was a wild horse lady, who refused to get married, “[u]ntil [her] great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off” (11), as if she was an object, like a chandelier bought from a shop. The great-grandmother was forced into marriage and never forgave her spouse, “she looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow.” (11) Esperanza is certain that, although she has “inherited her name, [she doesn’t] want to inherit her place by the window.” (11) Esperanza’s own remarks indicate that she is growing aware of the oppressive gender roles within the Hispanic culture, since she mentions that many other women also sit by the window, suggesting that this may be a common scenario in many homes. The disempowerment of women is also noted, since they can be “forced” by men to get married. The value of the home and particularly taking “the place by the window” into consideration now also represents oppression and possible violence against the female gender as well as restrain or forced placement in society.
Esperanza is a keen observer of gender roles, through watching what is happening to other female role around her. To her discovery, there is a row of women in her immediate surroundings, who take their seat by the window too. Sally and Rafaela are “too beautiful” to be outside, therefore they are confined to their homes. Rafaela is actually locked up in her own home by her husband, who is afraid that she will run away. On Tuesdays, when her husband is working late, she leans out the window to ask someone to buy her juice. Sally’s father comments on how being beautiful means trouble and refuses to let her out the house. When she disobeys him, she gets beaten by her father, yet still tries to defend him by saying that, “he never hits [her] hard” (92). Sally runs away and gets married, but she is still not allowed to go out, talk on the phone or see her friends, except when she is at work. Although she is happy with having her “own” home and things, she is too afraid to go out without her husband’s permission. This escape leads her straight into another cage, although she is not physically abused, but is now mentally abused. She tells Esperanza that she is in love, but Esperanza believes that she is doing it just to get away, even though she is way too young and not ready to get married. Esperanza becomes aware of how the girls use their sexuality to gain “freedom” from their fathers, but they are not free, as long as they are stuck in another man’s home and “care”. Finally, there is Minerva, who is just slightly older than herself, but is already stuck with two children, and abandoned by their father. Once more, Esperanza takes a different stance and evaluates her friends’ social behaviour as an outsider looking in, instead of being the friend of these girls. This is Cisneros’ way of protesting against the patriarchal gender roles, through Esperanza’s view and. Home means entrapment, the loss of integrity, living by men’s rules and the threat of violence.

The gender roles within the barrio are shocking for Esperanza to come to terms with, not only through the observation of her friends, but through her own disastrous personal experiences too. At her first job, a much older male colleague forces a kiss on her. Later on, she is sexually abused by another man, when Sally left her all by herself at the carnival. This is definitely a loud protest against how women are treated in the Mexican-American communities, and a symbol of anger, telling the world what the Hispanic women have to put up with. A home in this neighbourhood cannot seem to offer women safety at all, and as a result they are not safe in their own homes or out in the community. This little girl has now lost all her innocence, even her trust for her friend. She now understands why Sally’s father says that it is dangerous to be beautiful, since it may imply that you will have to endure even more abuse from men.
Esperanza soon realises what the future has in store for her, and she knows that if she were to be like her friends and conform to the norms of the Hispanic barrio, she will end up being just like them. One more Hispanic girl locked up or beaten, she despises the idea, and decides that she has to escape her predicament and would like to leave and disconnect herself from this vicious circle of the patriarchal system. The only one of her friends who does not run away and get married, is Alicia, who seems to be the only positive influence on her. Alicia is a good role model for Esperanza, who inspires her to get an education, and refuses to be stuck behind that rolling pin or work in a factory, so that she can set herself free. This aspect reflects the genre conventions of a coming of age novel, with a positive role model influencing the protagonist, and she actually matures from the initial innocent self to a knowledgeable one. Esperanza decides that she wants to leave Mango Street and be rid of this shameful identity. She will take on the battle of sexuality versus autonomy, and she knows now that the only way to be free is to get away from the dump that she lives in. Esperanza´s family usually visits where her father works, and admires the houses on the hill, but she realises that her urge to leave is so strong that she cannot bear to look at what they do not have, and she is ashamed of how all of them stare “out the window looking like the hungry” (86). She starts dreaming of having her own house, where she will be able to invite guests over and be independent of men. She starts her silent war against the patriarchal system. The home now represents freedom, independence, dignity and self-empowerment, because home is now referring to her own dream home, which she will work towards.

On the other hand, the three elder sisters not only advise Esperanza to return for those who cannot leave as easily as her, but they also remind her that through helping the others will subsequently assist her in gaining independence too. In fact, the sisters tell her not to abandon her heritage and identity and therefore she must return. Alicia too, reminds her not to forget who she is, and tells her that, “[l]ike it or not, you are Mango Street and that one day you’ll come back too” (107). In addition Alicia and the three old sisters´ encouragement bring to light that home is not necessarily in a physical spot, since she will always be a part of that community and Mango Street. Indeed, it is through setting herself free from the burdens of her cultural constrains, and concentrates on the mobility which it can offer her, that she can escape. Despite Esperanza´s retaliation against her own culture, the fact that she is not forced to marry is already an improvement from her great-grandmother or mother´s generations. She is encouraged to see the positive changes in and continue to contribute towards them.
After all the advice Esperanza receives from the three sisters and Alicia, she finally comes to terms with the palm reading, in the vignette, “Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water”, where Elenita tells her that she has a home in the heart, and that there is a new house, a house made of heart (64). Otherwise, Esperanza she does not grasp the meaning of the palm reading until after Alicia and the three sisters confront her. It becomes clear that Esperanza needs to make peace with her inner self, to able to be free herself from her burdens, thus she also realises that leaving physically cannot change the fact that she “is Mango Street”. When she establishes her own home in the heart it shall remain as a reminder to help the others, who cannot leave as easily as her. Subsequently, Esperanza wants become the heroine of her community, she plans to become a writer. She also plans to her escape from her dependency on Mango Street, but not her social identity and will almost return with a vengeance, in the sense that she will serve as the voice of the many women who are silenced in her community, through her writing. As a result, she will be able to help the others through her home in the heart, and home now represents pride and integrity and independence.

A home in the heart plus a house of her own, reflecting Virginia Woolf´s idea of a room of her own, in which Esperanza can be set free, she can be a writer, help the others in her community and have bums staying in the attic, if they have nowhere to sleep. A house of her own will be totally independent from the patriarchal system and it will be exactly the way she wants it:

[It is] [n]ot a flat. Not an apartment in the back. Not a man´s house. Not a daddy´s. [It will be] [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. [There will be] [n]obody to shake a stick at. Nobody´s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, as space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

The description of her own house clearly implies self-empowerment, completely free from the men and a victory over them. The significance of “a house quiet as snow, and clean as paper before the poem”, may suggest her wanting to replenish parts of her lost innocence, perhaps by erasing some of the awful experiences, so that she can feel like clean paper again, since both snow and white paper resemble purity.

The last vignette of the book describes how stories will be told, and that she will make a story for her life and for each step her brown shoes take. She also calls her brown shoes
“sad”, which takes her “to the house she never liked.” (109) Esperanza once again changes her perspective and refers to herself as “she”, to show the disconnection between herself and the girl that lives in that “sad red house,” where she “belongs” but do not belong to. It does end with the beginning:

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, (ibid110) but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to. (110)

This closes the circle as previously mentioned, and now with the plot events within the circle are disclosed. This circulation proves the value and meaning of a house and home for the protagonist throughout her story. In the very end we see two sets of answers, the “sad red house” which is dad´s house and the dream house that is quiet as snow. The “sad” house represent the painful process of her coming of age, and despite being marginalised by her race, class and gender, she is still able to tell her story. It is a struggle between home and homelessness, not belonging and wanting to belong, that makes her feel homeless, while her dream house is the one which represents home. She finally accepts her social identity, but refuses to become another victim, so she decides that she will move on, as soon as she can leave. She would like to be successful, so that people would talk about her even after she leaves. The home in her heart now represents freedom, hope, dream and goal.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this essay was to determine and monitor the meaning of house and home to the protagonist, throughout her coming of age process, by analysing the social and physical setting, with the help of close reading and discussion of the narrative technique to establish the function of home, and how the social and physical setting are affecting Esperanza’s ongoing evaluation of home.

I have proved that there is a constant change in the value of house and home for Esperanza, through analysing the physical and social setting and reading the house and home as a symbol. The reading shows that the meaning and function of home is directly influenced by the social and physical living environment. The literary function of the house also serves a social purpose on the people who live inside, which reflects the social setting and vice
versa. Furthermore, the physical setting was not just her home or house, it is actually the entire street, which was seen as ghetto. The fact that people like Cathy would keep moving away, when people like Esperanza´s family move in, is a direct link to the class prejudice and racism and this affects Esperanza´s value of her home and neighbourhood.

The home had initially represented entrapment, poverty, humiliation, instability, due to the poor neighbourhood and constant moving. Furthermore, through the analysis of culture and gender roles, I have also established that the patriarchal system in Mexican-American culture is accommodating for domestic violence, thus making the home environment violent and unsafe for the women. Women lose their independence and integrity, “The place by the window” and forced placement in society. It is clear that these women of entrapment who are mostly beaten or locked up are miserable, which provokes Esperanza to retaliate against her own culture, the Hispanic culture. The retaliation process slowly makes her aware of her own social identity, which she had initially refused to accept. At one stage, everything about the homes and houses on Mango Street only seems to contribute negative aspects on the value of home. I think that the cultural criticism is embedded in a very strategic way. I have been a minority for most parts of my life, because I have moved around a lot and have lived in many different countries, which makes me highly aware of cultural criticisms.

However, it is due to a more positive aspect of her culture, that Esperanza is helped to adapt a different view. With the encouragement of her fellow Hispanic sisters, Alicia and the three older ladies, she learns to accept her social identity. Esperanza was told to not forget who she is and she was reminded of the fact that "she is Mango Street” and that she must not forget those who are stuck and cannot leave as her. Upon learning that writing will set her free, Esperanza wants to be a writer and to be telling her stories of the barrio, in order to set the trapped one free, to raise public awareness and let the other victims know that they do have other choices. Esperanza realises that home is in the heart, which means that she has to set herself free, to be rid of her burdens, let go of her shame and be proud of who she is and to tell her story to save the others. This way she will be at peace with her own heart and the ideal home is really where she is, regardless of neighbourhood, as long as she has her independence and freedom, she is at home. Race or class do not matter and she is soaring high in her home at heart, when she finally makes peace with herself and is able to set herself free through writing, which is beyond simply leaving the street or her father´s house. This
change of evaluation process is directly influenced by Esperanza’s social and physical setting.

I can finally conclude that when Esperanza has come to accept her own social identity, she has also established the final value of home for herself, and this value is now in a positive light, because her home will be in her heart. A home in the heart will free her of the patriarchal system, racism, class prejudice and domestic violence. This essay has proven that there has been a constant change in the value of home, for the focalizer and protagonist of *The House on Mango Street*.

**Works Cited**


Secondary Sources:


