

# Esperanza: the hero who broke the cycle



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“ 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 . . . They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros 110). The House on Mango Street focuses on the mental progression of Esperanza as she observes her community. Many critics argue that this story illustrates a modernized bildungsroman because Esperanza matures into a young woman and attains an appreciation for her society due to her experiences. Yet Esperanza is an observer through the majority of the novel, and she forms an identity that opposes the typical female on Mango Street. Furthermore, Esperanza embodies several heroic attributes and represses them in order to fulfill what she believes is the norm for women, but after observing the “ imprisonment” these women face, she becomes determined to escape the same fate. Although Esperanza lacks the experience and maturity to escape Mango Street, she recognizes, with the help of her community and mentors, that she is a pre-determined heroine who is able to break the redundant cycle of entrapment and, through writing, able to return to Mango Street after finding success to save other generations of women from the same fate. From the beginning of the novel, Cisneros uses several descriptions that suggest Esperanza is capable of becoming a heroine. Although Esperanza is young and unsure about herself, her stories demonstrate her disposition as a strong woman. For example, in “ Hairs,” Esperanza characterizes her hair: “ It never obeys barrettes or bands” (Cisneros 6). Cisneros provides this description in order to parallel the innate temperament of her protagonist. Instead of recognizing the uniqueness of her hair, Esperanza believes her hair is “ lazy,” and describes the perfection of her mother’s hair. This demonstrates that Esperanza is

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uncomfortable with her disposition; she would rather have the norm. These ideas are developed further in "My Name." Again, Esperanza demonstrates her discomfort with being attributed to masculinity or strength: "It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse - which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born - but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (10). Esperanza evades her innate strength because she believes she will be rejected by her society. By denying her heroic attributes, Esperanza illustrates her insecurities and her immaturity: "Fear and hostility are the alienating forces she tries to understand" (de Valdés 164). Cisneros demonstrates the uncertainty her heroine encounters due to social pressures. Esperanza is an inherently strong being, but her lack of experience leaves her vulnerable and doubtful of her abilities. Although she is afraid of social isolation and judgment, Esperanza opposes the redundant circular structure of entrapment into which her great-grandmother was forced. When describing her great-grandmother, Esperanza discusses her own desire to live an atypical life. Many women, as Esperanza will observe in her community, remain in the house while their husbands are free to explore. Even though Esperanza strives to adapt to the norms of her society, she refuses to adapt to the conventional lifestyles for women: "[My great-grandmother] looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow . . . I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza intends on living a life outside of the house and escaping Mango Street, but, in order to do this, she must progressively mature to become a secure, courageous individual. She must

overcome her anxieties of rejection and accept her innate strength. Her desires to leave Mango Street increase as she observes the women in the neighborhood and reflects on their positions in the home and inability to escape: " Esperanza comes to realize that she must leave Mango Street so that she will not be entrapped by poverty and shame or imprisoned by patriarchy" (Klein 24). Although Esperanza understands the redundancies for women on Mango Street, there is no immediate need to leave the neighborhood because she has not fully matured. Esperanza's inexperience also affects her security beyond her cultural group. In " Those Who Don't," Esperanza describes different colored people entering her neighborhood with anxiety due to physical differences. Although she believes there is nothing to fear within her own community, Esperanza's immaturity is exploited by her description of entering into a different neighborhood: " All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes" (Cisneros 28). Esperanza's implicit strength is minimized due to her lack of experience outside her social group. She criticizes the " others" for being afraid of Mango Street; yet, she is also determined to escape that same community. This also demonstrates Esperanza's youth because she desperately wants to abandon Mango Street, but she is afraid of what experiences await her outside her community. Esperanza then begins to progressively mature by accepting of her heroic attributes, recognizing that the women on Mango Street follow the same redundant cycle, and, with the help of mentors, accepting responsibility for future generations of women who may suffer the same fate as those in her community. As the novel continues, Esperanza begins to

acknowledge her inherent strength. Unlike in the earlier stories where she oppressed her tenacity, Esperanza associates herself with objects and people of power. For example, in "Four Skinny Trees," Esperanza discusses the physical similarities between her and the trees. She has made a connection to the trees "who do not belong here but are here" (Cisneros 74), similar to her own position on Mango Street. She then describes the inner strength of the trees: "Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger" (74). This parallels Esperanza's own disposition as a strong woman who relies on her community as an empowering force in order to one day explore outside Mango Street. She grows within her culture, and, in the future, she will grow within a different cultural setting: "The importance of community for Esperanza - of finding out where one belongs and making a space for oneself; realizing that she does indeed belong on Mango Street and to her Chicano community after all - is crucial" (Karafilis 67). Although Esperanza desires to escape Mango Street, she realizes her strength is reinforced by remaining within her community while maturing. Esperanza's acceptance of her heroic nature continues as the novel proceeds. Although her lack of experience keeps her silent, her inner strength grows. In "Beautiful & Cruel," Esperanza describes movies in which a strong woman takes control of her life and the people around her. Esperanza wants to be this type of woman, but, due to her youth, she is unable to achieve this goal at this time in her life; instead, she recognizes her abilities to become this "strong" woman: "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"

(Cisneros 89). Esperanza refuses to submit to the same redundant cycle as the other women on Mango Street; instead, she emulates the “strong” women in the movies. Esperanza exhibits her heroism when she believes Sally is being hurt by the boys in “The Monkey Garden.” She recognizes her responsibility to help the women of Mango Street from the same fate and attempts to rescue her friend: “[I] ran back down the three flights to the garden where Sally needed to be saved. I took three big sticks and a brick and figured this was good enough” (97). Unfortunately, Esperanza is humiliated due to her heroic efforts. After an increase of security with her heroism, Esperanza quickly regresses and is molested/raped by a man in “Red Clowns.” Due to her humiliation, Esperanza lapses back into an insecure girl, and she once again attempts to become “normal.” Unlike the other girls on Mango Street that are taken advantage of their whole lives, Esperanza’s experience with sexuality – or the “norm” – is unacceptable in her mind: “the knowledge with which she emerges is not that of regeneration, but of painful knowledge, the knowledge of betrayal and physical violation” (Klein 25). She does not care about the social isolation she may suffer any longer, she refuses to be violated or victimized like the other women on Mango Street. As Esperanza accepts her heroic abilities, she recognizes the redundant cycle of entrapment the women on Mango Street suffer. Through the novel, Esperanza observes a variety of women in the community that all experience the same oppression. “Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays” is an interesting parallel to the story of Rapunzel. Rafaela’s husband believes she is “too beautiful” to leave the house or go dancing, so she must remain in the house to avoid being abused. Esperanza and her friends bring her juice from the store, and Rafaela lets down a

clothesline in order to retrieve the juice. Esperanza's heroic nature is demonstrated through this action because she is aiding a woman she considers a "damsel in distress." Many of the women in this novel share the similar lifestyle: "there is an ironic twist to the guidance of mentors, for often Esperanza is guided by examples of women she does not want to emulate, such as Sally and Rafaela" (Klein 24). Although other women in the story guide Esperanza's talents and sense of responsibility, majority of the women in the neighborhood create a strong opposition to the life Esperanza desires. Sally also has a strong influence on Esperanza. When she was searching for social acceptance, Esperanza befriended Sally in order to understand the "norms" for women her age. Through her observations of and experiences with Sally, Esperanza learns that femininity and beauty parallel vulnerability and frailty in her community. Sally is trapped and abused by her father during her maturity, and in order to escape, Sally is married at an early age in "Linoleum Roses." Although Sally believes this is an escape, Esperanza has observed enough "imprisoned" women to understand that Sally has followed the same pattern as the other women on Mango Street: "She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry . . . he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working" (Cisneros 101-102). Sally is entrapped more than the other women, because she is forbidden to even look out the window - she is forbidden to dream of a different life. Sally believes she has escaped the redundancies of Mango Street, but Esperanza recognizes the same circular structure she must avoid. By including an increasing number of trapped women, Cisneros empowers her protagonist. In the beginning of the novel,

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Esperanza was torn between her concerns for social acceptance and her ambition to escape the cycle, but, as she observes the miserable lives of the women who chose the “ norm,” she decides to risk her social life for a better future. Esperanza realizes she would never be content in the redundant structure on Mango Street, so she must embrace her innate strength in order to overcome the degeneration of her community and escape. While she observes the entrapment of women on Mango Street and empowers herself in order to circumvent the same fate, Esperanza is advised by women and discovers her responsibility to her community. Guadalupe, Esperanza’s aunt, describes the importance of writing as a means of escape: “ You must keep writing. It will keep you free . . .”(Cisneros 61). Although Esperanza does not understand this message at first, she begins to understand that her abilities will help her avoid the same fate as the other women. Similar to this advice, Esperanza’s mother stresses the importance of education to her daughter: “ Esperanza, go to school. Study hard” (91). Her mother explains that shame can interrupt her progression. This message is extenuated by Esperanza’s heroic humiliation and rape in the following stories, illustrating that shame can lead to regression and vulnerability. Esperanza does not understand the messages at first, but due to experience, she recognizes the necessity to listen to others in order to escape: “[Her mentors] nurture her writing talent, show her ways to escape the bonds of patriarchy, and remind her of cultural and communal responsibilities” (Klein 24). The remaining mentors focus more attention on Esperanza’s future responsibilities to return to Mango Street in order to complete her heroic quest. Esperanza is determined to leave because she fears the same fate her great-grandmother faced, especially after her experience in “ Red Clowns.” She recognizes her inner



strength; yet, her young age leaves her vulnerable to the desires of men. Although she is afraid of the people outside of Mango Street, she is resolved to escape her community. In "The Three Sisters," three women discuss the Esperanza's destiny and place importance on her return to Mango Street after finding success. Cisneros' use of three sisters illustrates a mystical element in *The House on Mango Street*: "The tradition of the sisters of fate runs deep in western literature from the most elevated lyric to the popular tale of marriage, birth, and the fate awaiting the hero or heroine. In Cisneros' text, the prophecy of the facts turns to the evocation of self-knowledge" (de Valdés 170). Again, Esperanza interprets this message to mean she needs to return at some future point at time, but, combined with the advice from Alicia, Esperanza realizes her return will be one that changes the redundant structure of Mango Street. She argues with Alicia about who takes responsibility for change: "No, Alicia says. Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too" (Cisneros 107). Esperanza realizes then that not even the mayor will bring about the change; instead, due to her heroism and determination, she will be the woman to break the cycle. The women of Mango Street are relying on her to use her intellectual and mental strength in order to help future generations of women in the community. Through observation, experience, and advisement, Esperanza progresses into the courageous heroine she was pre-determined to become. Although she had to overcome certain struggles that women in her community face, Esperanza empowers herself through these experiences and decides she will control her own destiny by escaping Mango Street; yet, as revealed by her mentors, she is Mango Street, and she has a responsibility as a strong woman to return to Mango Street and save future

generations from the oppressive cycle. She illustrates her understanding of the mentor's messages in the end, proving she has matured throughout the novel; on the other hand, she is still vulnerable in the community and has not experienced any cultural diversity. She has not resolved her initial fears of "outsiders," and in order to show complete growth, she must leave Mango Street and maintain her cultural identity that she has embraced. Although this story is not complete to fulfill a bildungsroman, Cisneros provides the reader with a heroic female that is determined to change her societal norms through education and writing. Writing, as Guadalupe explains, has freeing powers, and Esperanza will not only use her writing abilities to escape Mango Street herself, but her writing will also free the future women of Mango Street from an oppressive fate.