

Finding home in passing and the house on mango street



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Both Clare, from *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, and Esperanza, the protagonist of *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, seek to find a figurative 'home' in society, a place where they are accepted by those around them and free to express themselves. However, both characters feel that the roles they are inherently fettered into are holding them back; Clare cannot achieve economic and social freedom in the black community, and Esperanza cannot achieve true acceptance while being ashamed of her cultural heritage. By comparing the way these characters employ the seductive powers of female sexuality, and exploring their differences in their attempts to reintegrate themselves into society, one can see that true freedom, what they were after all along, can only be achieved in the mind first, and not in a different community, or on a different street. Both characters come to realize that the false sense of triumph achieved by 'passing' or by flirting with men is a double-edged sword; while advancing them toward what they feel is liberation, true freedom eludes them further. When faced with pivotal circumstances at the end, Clare finds ultimate liberation in death. Esperanza however, finds herself in her ability to write and tell stories. Both women finally choose the thing which best expresses their raw selves. In *Passing*, the reader is introduced to Clare through Irene's eyes, Clare's long-time, ambiguously intentioned friend. Clare is described in rich, luxurious detail, as a mysteriously alluring, yet emotionally inaccessible beauty. In the hotel lobby, toward the beginning of the novel, Irene, before knowing she was watching Clare, sees: "an attractive looking woman... with those dark, almost black eyes, and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin"(14). In addition, her laugh was "a lovely laugh, a small sequence of notes that was like a trill and also like the ringing of

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delicate bells fashioned of a precious metal, a tinkling" (18). These generous descriptions of the lovely Clare serve as a lead-up to an explanation of how Clare was so successful in 'passing' and advancing into the rarefied upper-class of New York society. She admits to Irene that she could pass because "[she] knew [she] wasn't bad-looking" and had "a little nerve" (26, 25). Her motivation when she first started was to secure the things she dreamed of having, but could never attain. Things like money, social freedom, and status were Clare's goals, and she achieved them successfully by abandoning her racial identity. In the same way, Esperanza, in her first-person narrative, describes some of the female characters in the same envious and enamored way Irene depicts Clare. Lois, "tiny and pretty...[with] big girl hands... and makeup" and Sally, with her shiny black hair that flicks back "like a satin shawl over her shoulders," make Esperanza wish to "sit out bad at night, a boy around [her] neck and the wind under [her] skirt"(73, 81, 73). She wants to feel alive, to feel accepted and attractive, instead of the familiar pangs of shame at her family's economic status and Mexican heritage. She escapes this feeling of inferiority by utilizing her sexual powers over men, relishing the attention she gets when she wears her high heeled shoes. The first mention of Clare's dissatisfaction with her life appears in the letter she writes to Irene early on in the novel. She writes, "It may be, ' Rene dear, it may just be, that, after all, your way may be the wiser and infinitely happier one. I'm not sure just now. At least not so sure as I have been" (47). This sentence expresses a sharp paradigm shift for Clare, who must now confront her race and explore where she feels the most at home. Clare begins to disregard her own safety in a desperate attempt to rekindle her connection with the Harlem community in order to feel accepted and find happiness and

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freedom, things she did not find when she achieved monetary and social success in the white community. She tells Irene, "' You're free. You're happy. And... safe'" (67). Esperanza experiences similar moments of realization when she is exposed to the dangerous consequences that accompany beauty. Though at first, she feels exhilarated by the ability of " those magic high heels" to transform her into a desirable woman, she quickly grows " tired of being beautiful"(40, 42). In addition, when the Oriental man forcefully kisses Esperanza on the mouth instead of on the cheek, Esperanza is filled with an immediate sense of disgust. She realizes that utilizing sexuality as a means of escape actually cages her further and further into the prison cell of a male-based society. While she thinks that she has the upper hand in controlling the men around her with her femininity, she is, in reality, letting them control her by forcefully taking advantage of her body and objectifying her. In retaliation, she begins to construct a new perspective on the sexual role she will play in society. Rather than buying into the image of the prototypical beauty with " red red lips... who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away," Esperanza " leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate"(89). In other words, she abandons her womanly wiles for frankness. At the end of the novel, both Clare and Irene achieve freedom. The key difference, however, lies in their divergent methods of acquiring it. Clare, the woman who once told Irene that ' passing' was ' worth the price," now wants to live in Harlem more than anything, where "[she'd] be able to do as [she] please[s]" (28, 106). At the party, in the last scene, when Clare dies after Jack storms in, Irene's descriptions are consistently riddled with terms of beauty. She thinks, " the soft white face, the bright hair... the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the

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whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry..." (111). To the end, the novel objectifies Clare as that beauty, even in her death. The entire picture that was Clare—the red lipstick and the extravagant dresses, which were once just tools to successfully 'pass,' were now so much a part of her that she could not throw it off. Trapped between the white community, which she belonged to externally, and the black community, where she belonged ethnically and mentally, Clare seeks ultimate freedom in death. She finally realized that it was not worth it to escape who she is for the pursuit of material things. She realizes at the end that ultimately, she just wanted to feel at home, accepted by a community of people like her. In stark contrast, Esperanza redeems herself through writing. She channels her sexual expression into artistic expression. At the end of the novel, she starts telling a story about a "girl who didn't want to belong"(109); no longer is the adolescent who would do anything fit in, who would give men kisses or wear provocative shoes. Esperanza finds 'home,' in putting her emotions down on paper, and unlike Clare, does not need to leave Mango Street in order to achieve this freedom. While Clare is inextricably linked to the people of Harlem, she can never be free in the white community. Her only escape is death. Esperanza's struggle however, is less locative, and so she is able to liberate her mind while remaining in the same house. In conclusion, Clare and Esperanza seek to find freedom and acceptance in the societies around them, and utilize beauty as a means to escape from what is holding them back. Clare, with her calculated airs and womanly charm, weasels her way out of Harlem and into white society, where she thinks she will find satisfaction in the luxuries and freedom it offers. Esperanza, to escape the squalor of her surroundings, dons the mask of a provocative woman, seeking

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comfort in her control over men. However, both women realize that all they want is a home, where they can be themselves and express themselves without living a lie. Clare cannot start over as easily as Esperanza can, and so she chooses death as the ultimate liberation. Esperanza, however, redefines herself in society by abandoning her sexuality and bringing her writing ability to the fore. In this, she finds ultimate freedom and feels the most at home.