



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Sandra Cisneros'

The House on Mango Street

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET is a coming-of-age novella (or *bildungsroman*) centering on a Latina girl named Esperanza, her family, and neighbors in a Chicago neighborhood. A novella is longer than a short story, but shorter than a novel. Each chapter of the novella, *The House on Mango Street*, tells a small part of Esperanza's experiences growing up in the first house her family owned. Although each chapter or vignette can stand as a separate story, read collectively, they weave a tale of family and community in an American ethnic neighborhood and tell Esperanza's story as she discovers herself and fights to both belong and not belong to Mango Street. Some of the vignettes can be classified as prose poems, having a lyricism that matches free verse poetry in the paragraph format of prose.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The House on Mango Street*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining the Roles of the Women in Esperanza's Life

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The House on Mango Street: Feminist Theory Activity One Worksheet*.
2. Open the class with a discussion of positive and negative women role models found in today's society. Create a list of each.
3. Divide the class into five groups or a number of groups divisible by five.
4. Assign to each group (or allow each to choose) one of the five major female characters in the story: Sally, Mama, Aunt Lupe, Alicia, Marin.
5. Have each group discuss its character and complete the chart.
6. As they discuss their characters, have the groups pay particular attention to the influence this character has on Esperanza's life and development. Is that woman a positive or negative role model?
7. As a class, discuss each of the characters. Each person should continue to fill out the worksheet for each of the characters.
8. Discuss the ways in which each of these characters impact Esperanza. How do the roles they play and the situations that Esperanza observes affect the person she becomes?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The House on Mango Street*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

The terms “psychological,” or “psychoanalytical,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Exploring the Id, Ego, and Superego Through the Character of Esperanza

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The House on Mango Street: Psychoanalytic Theory Activity One Worksheet*.
2. Open with the discussion of the two phrases “the devil on your shoulder” and “the angel on your shoulder.” What do they mean in terms of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory? Which subconscious level in Freud’s theory could each represent?
3. Divide the class into pairs to complete the handout.
4. Reconvene the class and discuss each group’s findings and opinions.

Formalist Approach Applied to The House on Mango Street



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Exploring the Reasons for Character Appearances (Why Are You Here?)

1. As a class, discuss the fact that there are several characters who appear only once in the story. List a few.
2. Divide the class into pairs.
3. Review the list of rarely seen characters (make certain the list includes):
 - Gil
 - Meme Ortiz
 - Louie
 - Rose Vargas
 - Darius
 - Uncle Nacho
 - Elenita
 - Geraldo
 - Ruthie
 - Sire
 - Mamacita
 - Rafaela
 - Minerva
4. Have each pair discuss: Assuming that the author (Sandra Cisneros) is in control of her work, and that every character has a purpose, why is each of the above characters included in the novel?
5. Since the point of view is from Esperanza's eyes, have the students include in their discussion what that character's reason for being tells us about Esperanza. What does this character's inclusion contribute to our understanding of her as a character?
6. Reconvene the class and discuss each character.