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Cami Berman

On the Inside of the Window

In *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros follows a year in the life of a young Chicana girl, Esperanza, who has just moved into a new house in a very crowded Latino-neighborhood in Chicago with her family (Cisneros 3). At the beginning of the book, Esperanza explains that her family moved often and the house on Mango Street was the first residence they fully owned (Cisneros 4). Although this house was finally theirs, it did not feel like a home to Esperanza. Even though she did not like the house at first, she would soon learn to appreciate it and all the different people she meets by living there (Cisneros 3). Sandra Cisneros uniquely tells all of Esperanza's experiences through vignettes, each one about a different event or story she witnessed. One common symbol Esperanza noted throughout the book was the repetition of windows. This symbol represents a theme of women during that time seeing a 'window of opportunity' but not being able to reach it. The recurrence of windows in this text proves that for many different people during the early 1980s, especially Chicana women, it was very difficult to follow their dreams and achieve overall success and happiness.

The first major occurrence of windows in this book is in the fourth vignette entitled *My Name*. In this vignette, Esperanza mentions, "She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow... Esperanza. I have inherited her name but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). In this quote, Esperanza is talking about her great-grandmother, from whom she inherited her name. Esperanza did not know her great-grandmother, but from what she had heard about her, she was very wild and free until her husband "threw a sack over her head and carried her off" (Cisneros 11). At a young age, she has

learned that women who are stuck behind these windows are “trapped” and will not achieve much. Esperanza even assumes that her great-grandmother was not happy with the life she was given, as she regretfully watched the outside world from inside her home (Cisneros 11). If Esperanza’s great-grandmother was able to escape from her window, she may have accomplished great things and been more satisfied with her life. Instead, Esperanza wishes that she does not have a life anything like her ancestor.

In this book, windows are often a symbol of women being held back by men, such as their fathers or husbands. For example, in the vignette *Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays*, Rafaela is stuck inside because her husband refuses to let her leave since he believes she will run away due to her beauty. Esperanza knows that Rafaela wishes she could have a much different life, writing, “Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s. On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old” (Cisneros 79). Esperanza makes friends with her by going to the store to buy her things that she cannot get without leaving her window (Cisneros 79). Esperanza even notes that they often forget she is up there watching them since she has become so used to her eyes peering over them from her high window (Cisneros 80). Rafaela watches the children from her window as a form of admiration, as she is jealous of how free the children are wandering and playing in the streets (Cisneros 80). In this book, it was typically men to blame for taking away these women’s opportunities, forcing them to wish their life away by sitting at the window each day. If Rafaela was able to come outside of her home, even just to go to the store herself, she may have gained more happiness, and in return, found opportunities that would allow her to become a more successful woman.

Towards the end of the book, readers see one of Esperanza's closest friends also get trapped behind a window. Sally married very young in order to escape her abusive father (Cisneros 100). Esperanza claims that although her friend says she is happy, she does not believe her because her husband limits many things that Sally is able to do (Cisneros 101). Esperanza tells us, "She is happy except sometimes her husband gets angry... though most days he is okay. Except 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). Through this quote, it seems as if Sally is living the life of a prisoner and no one should have this many rules to obey. The rules are quite strict, but there is no reason for her not to be able to look out the window. The author added this portion to prove how symbolic windows are during this whole story. If Sally were to look out the window, she may see new opportunities or gain new ideas that will in return lead to her wanting to leave and be independent. Throughout this book, it seems frowned upon for women to have their own independent thoughts and create dreams out of them, so men often do what they can in order to prevent this. This is important because if Sally was able to experience the real world after she married, she would have found a variety of opportunities to contribute to her happiness. Instead, she is stuck inside under the guard of her husband and not able to participate in the joys outside of her window.

The windows throughout this book proved to carry a very symbolic message for the people reading it. It was often found that the women behind the windows were being restrained from the outside world that might have allowed them to dream and find new opportunities. Most of these windows were also described as run down and broken, and in some cases, the windows were boarded up. These mangled windows represented all the windows of opportunity that were

shut down and crushed for women in Chicago during this time. It was very important for Sandra Cisneros to include windows as a symbol of repressing women's opportunities because it showed the differences in gender roles during the 1980s. Overall, the windows symbolize the opportunities that women are missing but cannot reach as the window is only a view into their dreams and not a door they can walk through to achieve them. Many of these women could have gotten an actual job or found ways to make money. More importantly, all these women would have found joy in their lives if they were to get out from behind their windows and experience the real world.

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *House on Mango Street*. Jane Schaffer Publications, 1997.