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Melanie Klaben
Butler University

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Melanie Klaben

Colors in *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros employs colors to symbolize Esperanza's journey from childhood into young adulthood throughout *The House on Mango Street*. This kaleidoscope of symbolism appears in almost every vignette. Pink, red, yellow, and brown symbolize her encounters with innocence, femininity, sexualization, incomplete joy, unattainable dreams, and tradition. These encounters contribute to both her rejection of societal expectations and the disheartening realizations that lead her into independent womanhood.

Traditionally, pink correlates with the female gender, immaturity, and innocence. The connection between this color and immaturity is emphasized during the description of Lois. She is "tiny and pretty and smells like baby's skin" (Cisneros 73). She also has "baby toenails all painted pale pale pink, like little pink seashells, and she smells pink like babies do" (Cisneros 73). "Pink" and "babies" are linked together in this description. Lois is powerless, like a baby, when she is with Sire (Cisneros 73). Since pink is a symbol of femininity, this epitomizes the lack of power that women have against men. Esperanza's "new slip with a little rose on it and a pink-and-white striped dress" (Cisneros 46) symbolize her childhood innocence and immaturity. It also represents her desire to conform to traditional feminine traits. However, later in the book, she is appalled by the way that women are expected to live. The idea that pink is a feminine color is a social construct and Esperanza buys into this and other social norms in the beginning. After she grows into a young woman, she realizes that she does not want to conform to societal expectations. She wants her own house, "not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all [her]

own” (Cisneros 108). She rejects the social constructs, goes against traditional femininity, and develops out of childhood innocence.

The mature version of pink is red, which has sexual symbolism in *The House on Mango Street*. As Esperanza evolves out of childhood and into womanhood, red becomes more significant. The color appears in times when Esperanza is losing innocence or encountering sexual situations. The house on Mango Street is “small and red” (Cisneros 4), which is significant because Esperanza loses her childhood innocence during the time in which she lives there. The most impactful symbolism of red occurs when Esperanza is raped at the carnival. She “was waiting by the red clowns” (Cisneros 99) when the boys sexually violate her. In this case, the color that American society usually associates with sexual passion is associated with sexual assault. The red pair of high heels that Lucy, Rachel, and Esperanza try on also symbolize some of the girls’ first exposure to sexuality. They are warned that they are “too young to be wearing shoes like that” (Cisneros 41). The sexualization of female apparel is evident in this vignette because society has made items associated with females unnecessarily sexual. In a child’s view, wearing high heels is innocently fun, but after the drunk man offers to give Rachel a dollar for a kiss, they “are tired of being beautiful” (Cisneros 42). Esperanza and her friends become aware of the unfair sexual objectification that is placed on females.

In literature and modern culture, yellow is usually associated with happiness; however, in this book, it symbolizes incomplete joy and unattainable dreams. Louie’s cousin’s stolen car is described as a “great big yellow Cadillac with whitewalls and a yellow scarf tied around the mirror” (Cisneros 24). The yellow Cadillac makes Louie’s cousin, Esperanza, and the other passengers happy, but it is in vain. True happiness cannot be reached because the car is stolen,

and he is unable to purchase a Cadillac. Louie's cousin has a brief taste of wealth before "they put handcuffs on him and put him in the backseat of the cop car" (Cisneros 25). Another example of a yellow object is one of the three pairs of shoes that Rachel, Lucy, and Esperanza wear. This pair of shoes symbolizes incomplete joy and unattainable dreams because the girls are simply trying to have childish fun when they encounter the drunk man. He says, "your little lemon shoes are so beautiful. But come closer... what's your name pretty girl" (Cisneros 41). After experiencing this, "Lucy hides the lemon shoes" (Cisneros 42). They just want to innocently wear the high heels, but the sexualization of the shoes crushes their fun.

Brown is associated with the tradition from which Esperanza is attempting to separate herself. Brown is not usually viewed as a beautiful color, which further symbolizes the undesirability of tradition. Esperanza describes the brown shoes as "the old saddles shoes I wear to school, brown and white, the kind I get every September because they last long and they do. My feet scuffed and round, and the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress" (Cisneros 47). Her brown shoes, a symbol of tradition, ruin her pink and white dress, which is a symbol of femininity. This represents how the sexist traditions in her culture impede the women's ability to find joy in their lives. She is embarrassed by her shoes, so she tries to hide her feet and "pick on a wad of brown gum that's stuck beneath the seat" (Cisneros 47). These descriptions of brown objects occur while Esperanza is unhappily attending a family party and would rather not be associated with her family's traditions (Cisneros 47). Earlier in the book, Esperanza describes her neighborhood as "all brown all around" (Cisneros 28) because of the skin color of the Mexican immigrants living around her. Outsiders have the false impression that they are "dangerous" (Cisneros 28) and "will attack them with shiny knives" (Cisneros 28).

These prejudices against Mexicans bother Esperanza and she desires a change with the way in which people perceive her. In the final vignette, Esperanza refers to her brown shoes again and says, “I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes” (Cisneros 109). She is carrying her Mexican identity and traditions with her, but creating a life that is distinctive. She describes herself as “a girl who didn’t want to belong” (Cisneros 109).

The maturity and development of Esperanza is symbolized by the colors that Cisneros chose to meticulously incorporate throughout *The House on Mango Street*. In one of the first vignettes, Esperanza declares that she “inherited her [grandmother’s] name, but [she doesn’t] want to inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros 11). The pinks, reds, yellows, and browns help guide her away from the window at which so many women are stuck.

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, 1984.