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Leaving the House on Mango Street: One girl's personal triumph over repressive culture and gender expectations

Leaving the House on Mango Street:
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In a series of vignettes, author Sandra Cisneros describes the maturation of a naive girl to a wise, purposeful woman in her book *The House on Mango Street*. She captures the challenging experiences of a young girl growing up in an impoverished neighborhood that include traumatic incidents, such as a sexual assault. The narrator and main character's experience of living on Mango Street is definitively shaped by her being a woman. Esperanza learns what it means to be a woman, not just from her traumatic experiences but also from watching the other women of Mango Street. As Esperanza witnesses the women that she loves being repressed by gender expectations, she is transformed from an innocent girl into a woman with a vision of a more expansive life.

As Esperanza gets to know a girl at her school named Sally, "...the girl with eyes like Egypt and nylons the color of smoke," she observes the struggles Sally faces being a girl who gets a lot of attention from boys because she's beautiful. The simile 'eyes like Egypt' suggests that Sally might be foreign or mysterious to Esperanza. The boys that like to be around Sally do things to take advantage of her. A big example of this is when they say to Sally "you can't get [your] keys back unless you kiss us" and Sally says yes (96). But not only does Sally go through this, she also has a physically abusive father [who] says that to be this beautiful is trouble. They are very strict in his religion" (Cisneros 81). The way that Sally's father treats his daughter is relevant to something that was once said by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her talk "We Should All Be Feminists": "We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. If we have sons, we don't mind knowing about our sons' girlfriends. But our daughters' boyfriends? God forbid" (Adichie). Adichie's point is that when girls start to have boyfriends, the situation is taken way more seriously by their parents than when a boy gets a girlfriend, maybe because of the way we think of gender and ownership. We think of the man, whether a father or a husband, as *owning* the woman. So when Sally's father sees her talking to a boy, he punishes her not because he wants to keep her safe, but because he is territorial of her and wants to establish his ownership of her, to her. And so he beats her. Even though the boys that Sally hangs out with will sometimes do things to her that are wrong, and her physically abusive father even forbids her from talking to them, Sally doesn't avoid these boys because she gets approval by being around them. This approval comes not just from the boys but also her friends, with the exception of Esperanza. Even though Sally tells Esperanza that it's no big deal if the boys make her kiss them in turn for her keys back, Esperanza knows that they are taking advantage of her. Before knowing of and experiencing these terrible struggles, Esperanza was much more naive. She was very interested in what it was like to get attention from boys and unaware of these dark parts of sexuality.

Esperanza knows Rafaela, another woman who lives on Mango Street. This is because on Tuesday nights when her husband is away playing dominoes, Rafaela calls down to Esperanza and her friends from her window, asking them to bring her coconut or papaya juice from a store. She throws down a dollar bill and they deliver her juice up to her on a clothesline. Rafaela has a husband who doesn't allow her to go out of her house, and locks her inside when he leaves. According to her husband Rafaela is "too beautiful to look at" and so he fears that she will run away (79). Rafaela is young, but Esperanza describes her as "getting old from leaning out the window so much" (79). The word "window" is used very often in *The House on Mango Street* and seems to be a metaphorical motif representing how the women of Mango Street view the part of the world that they can't experience. Seeing, observing, and communicating with Rafaela, Esperanza experiences a woman's struggle of being trapped inside her own home. She

learns of the terrible situation of many of the married women that surround her, and that it's likely to be her friends' futures. Being exposed to more and more of the struggles of being a woman, Esperanza becomes more mature and gains a more accurate view of the world.

Esperanza learns something very important when she meets three older women at a funeral. The women, who are sisters, learn Esperanza's name, and then look at her hands. They say that she is special and that she'll go very far. After being told to, Esperanza silently makes a wish, and the woman tells her she knows it will come true. It was "as if she knew what [Esperanza] has wished for," because then one of the sisters holds Esperanza's face and tells Esperanza that when she leaves she has to remember to return to Mango Street, for the ones she'll have left behind. Esperanza tells her she will, and she never sees the sisters again (105).

From her friend Alicia, Esperanza gains an important life lesson. They are having a conversation on Alicia's doorstep, and Alicia is listening "to [Esperanza's] sadness because [she doesn't] have a house" (Cisneros 106). Alicia points to the house on Mango Street where Esperanza has lived for the past year, but Esperanza just shakes her head. Esperanza believes that she doesn't belong there, and that she doesn't ever want to come from that house. She dreams of living in a house all her own; a house that's as "quiet as snow, a space for [herself] to go, clean as paper before the poem" (108). But, Alicia tells Esperanza that like it or not she *is* Mango Street, and that there will come a day when she will return to it. Esperanza denies this, saying that she will not return until someone makes the place better. But Alicia responds asking, "who's going to do it? The mayor?" And this makes Esperanza laugh (107). By talking to Alicia, Esperanza not only begins to understand that Mango Street will always be a part of her even if she doesn't want it to be, but she also receives an important life lesson. Esperanza learns that if she wants to change something, that she has to change it herself, not wait for someone else to. What Alicia was telling her friend here is important and true, and also supports what the three women at the funeral were trying to say to Esperanza.

Through her friendships with Sally, Rafaela, Marin and other women, Esperanza gains understanding that they are all "waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change [their] life," and that when they take this passive position they are trapped; cut off from the rest of the world (Cisneros 27). She is transformed from a naive girl, innocently excited about getting older and wondering what she'll experience, into a woman who is more aware of the gendered struggles that women face. She wants to utilize her capacity and freedom to bless the lives of those who remained trapped in the limitations of Mango Street. In the last chapter of the book, Esperanza talks to the reader about how she puts her stories of Mango Street on paper, "and then the ghost [of Mango Street] does not ache so much" (110). One day she will walk away from Mango Street. One day there will be people on Mango Street wondering where she went. But Esperanza confirms to the reader that yes, she will come back "for the ones who cannot out" (110). *Because* it is not grammatically correct, the author of *The House on Mango Street* puts the word "out" as a way of grabbing the reader's attention to the last word of the book. Cisneros might have chosen to do this because it also pulls attention toward the entire meaning of the sentence, which is important and relevant to the entire book: that from learning important lessons from the women of Mango Street, Esperanza decides that she will come back for them.