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THE TRANSFORMATION OF HOUSE INTO HOME IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S *THE  
HOUSE*

*ON MANGO STREET*

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*The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.*

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**Abstract**

This study examines the German Philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of 'dwelling', implementing his ideas in the analysis of the novel *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. The aim of the work is to investigate the difference between the concepts of "home" and "house", analysing them in detail. The study is mainly focused on exploring a deeper understanding of the concept of home, and how exactly it affects the human sense of belonging and identity. Besides, the study explores the French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard's poetic home to complement the investigation. The work can be extended in theories of homes and houses in the literary narratives.

This study further focuses on the aspect of feminization of house and home, and how the stereotypes associated with these concepts directly affect the female characters in the novel.

**Key words:** home, house, belonging, identity, community, Mango Street, limitations

## INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: “A house is made of walls and beams; a home is built with love and dreams” (Emerson, 2020: 43). The difference between the concepts of home and house has always been of interest not only to social geographers but also to writers, philosophers, and philologists. Home is a place where you belong; however, is it always a physical house? We are used to thinking of home as a physical place, but is there a distinction between a physical house and a home? There is definitely a difference. While a house, according to the *Cambridge dictionary*, is “a building or part of a building that is used for a special purpose” (3), that is, a physical structure that serves for the protection of life inside it, the home symbolizes much more than the building itself. The concept of “home” can differ around various cultures and nationalities. While for most, home is mostly associated with a physical building or dwelling, for others, it may be more about a feeling of belonging, family, and security rather than a specific physical structure. This sense of family and belonging is at the very root of the idea of home from the classical world: "The Romans got their 'domus' from the Old Indo-European root dem, family" (Rykwert, 1991: 52).

In literary narratives, the concepts of 'house' and 'home' often intertwine; nevertheless, they have various meanings that significantly affect the identities and experiences of the characters of the narratives. This paper investigates the transition of “home” into “house” through in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* by focusing on the analysis of the protagonist’s emotional connection with her environment and the hardships she has to face, drawing on Heidegger’s and Bachelard’s philosophical frameworks. The question of the concept of house as well as home, along with the difference between these notions, often arise in situations where people have to change their places of residence, move frequently from place to place or lose their place of belonging. Sandra Cisneros’s acclaimed novel *The House on Mango Street*

dramatically depicts the contrast between both concepts along with the similarities revealing the journey of its protagonist Esperanza together with other characters. The narrative is mainly set in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago and illustrates the socio-economic challenges and hardships of the people who used to living there at that particular period of time. The novel vividly explores Esperanza's striving to reconsider her understanding of 'home', which is mostly based on the image of the physical house; from the internal limitations of the house, Esperanza struggles to confront the various difficulties caused by her physical environment. This thesis analyses how Cisneros' narrative delves into the difference between "home" and "house", mutually replacing these concepts with the flow from one to another and vice versa. The analysis integrates the philosophical frameworks of Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard to explore deeper references and insights within the text, thus placing the analysis within the so-called "spatial turn" which takes Michel Foucault's "Of Other Places" as seminal text, and was then followed by French scholars like Henry Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, as well as American social geographers like Edward Soja and Jane Jacobs, among many others.

In Martin Heidegger's philosophy, particularly in "Building Dwelling Thinking" (1951), he explores the concept of "dwelling" in the houses central to human existence. In Heidegger's philosophy, the house is considered primarily as a physical structure. The house is a material and constructed entity, the main idea of which is given to architectural aspects that ensure practicality. In contrast, the home, according to the philosopher, becomes an ontological space that goes beyond the material world. Heidegger claims that real dwelling goes beyond the physical occupation of space, embracing a balanced existence: "Dwelling, however, is the basic character of being in keeping with which mortals exist" (Heidegger, 1971: 143). In *The House on Mango Street*, this philosophical perspective allows to move beyond the material limitations of Esperanza's physical home and to explore a deeper understanding of "home" as a place of emotional and existential significance.

To complement Heidegger's philosophy, this thesis also relies on French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of intimate spaces, which reveals a different perspective on the concept of "home" and the deeper meaning of narrative. Bachelard investigates how the intimate spaces in a physical house, for instance, rooms,

corners, and nook tend to be vessels for memory and imagination. He explores how different spaces of the home shape people's experiences and identities. In his fundamental work, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), he assumes that such spaces provoke inner, personal reactions, transfiguring physical shapes into storages of dreams and memories. For the main character in Cisneros's novel, the house on Mango Street itself turns out to be such a "vessel"; however, it retains negative emotions, pain, feelings of inferiority and limitations. Despite her young ages, Esperanza is acutely aware of the limitations of the house: "It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath" (Cisneros, 1984:4). This house, which is very far from her dreams, becomes a reservoir of imagination, what could be her real home, to which she could belong.

This thesis uses a methodological approach that relies on ideas of social geographers to analyze mentioned philosophical concepts and the way they are revealed in Cisneros' narrative. Through a close reading of the text, the study aims to examine key excerpts of the work in detail in order to define and interpret the theme of "home" and "house" as well as their interchangeability in the text. In addition, thematic coding is used to classify and study repeated motifs, allowing a systematic investigation of housing and identity. Phenomenological interpretation analyses the experience of the main character Esperanza, exploring how her emotions, feelings and imagination transform her physical environment, house into home.

The purpose of this work is to propose an extensive and detailed understanding of how *The House on Mango Street* manages the interconnection between the physical spaces of the house, comparing them with deeper, poetic notions of home. By combining the conceptions of Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard, this thesis aims to clarify the ways in which Cisneros' narrative reveals the deep personal and poetic significance of 'home' among the constraints of 'house', interchanging these concepts within the text. Through overcoming the limitations of the physical house as well as the hardships on the personal way, protagonist Esperanza ultimately transforms it into a true home, illustrating the importance of personal growth and awareness in redefining one's sense of belonging.

This thesis is divided into a general introduction, the first chapter, the second chapter, and a conclusion. The first chapter “Esperanza’s discovery of Heideggerian ‘Dwelling’ and ‘Home’ on Mango Street” centers on the difference between "home" and "house", drawing on Martin Heidegger’s seminal work *Building Dwelling Thinking*. The second chapter “Esperanza’s Rewriting of Bachelard’s Poetic Home” primarily examines the work *The House on Mango Street*, focusing on the theoretical framework of Gaston Bachelard’s *The poetics of Space* for a detailed analysis of "house" and "home" in the work. The conclusion then reveals the interconnections and transformations of house and home in the mind and experience of Esperanza Cordero.



## **Esperanza's Discovery of Heideggerian 'Dwelling' and 'Home' on Mango Street**

“We do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers” (Heidegger, 1971: 145). It is important to note that the concept of “home” mostly coincides in the views of many philosophers and writers, although there is no clear definition of it. As for the concept of “house”, there seems to be a clear definition, but it can vary depending on the field of study. And even though the notions of home and house stand side by side in their meaning and often can be interchangeable, nevertheless, there is a distinction between. In exploring the difference between the two terms, we can start with the question: was home always a physical house, namely a building with four walls, a roof, windows and doors, as we are used to imagine it nowadays? Even if research is conducted within the borders of one country, the place of residence of the local inhabitants has changed over the centuries. For example, in the seventeenth century in Ukraine, a clay hut with a thatched roof and round windows was considered a house. Today, a typical house for Ukrainians is an engineered concrete or stone dwelling with windows and a roof.

Taking into account the diverse countries of the world, we can easily claim that a home is not always a house for various cultures and nationalities. For instance, American "cone houses made of fur and wooden sticks were used by the nomadic natives of the USA” (Taylor, 2019). Or, for example, in the Philippines Palapas are open-air houses made from dry palms” (Taylor, 2019). Considering the wide diversity of houses and homes, Joseph Rykwert states: "Home could just be a hearth, a fire on the bare ground by any human lair" (Rykwert, 1991: 54). That is, we can say that home can be anything: a house, an apartment, a tent, a street, a fireplace.

In his work "Building Dwelling Thinking", first delivered as a lecture in 1951, Martin Heidegger explores the connections between human beings and their environment, centering on the ontological difference between house and home. In his research, he explores the idea that a building or structure doesn't always evoke the sense of a dwelling or home. He distinguishes the concept of a building as a material entity, where the focus is on architectural and functional aspects. In his understanding,

a house, a building, is mainly created to meet human needs, which may include human habitation inside, but this is not necessarily the case. At the same time, "home" in Heidegger's philosophy goes beyond the physical attributes of a house. It is rather a space where human being unfolds. Heidegger believes that human existence is directly related to space, and attachment to space can occur through the presence of locations. "The relation between location and space lays in the nature of these things qua locations, but so does the relation of the location to the man who lives at that location" (Heidegger, 1971: 154). Spaces through which a person moves directly belong to locations, namely physical constructions. That is, by examining the direct difference between the two aspects, it is possible to determine that they are interchangeable, because the concept of being and space that is related to home is directly linked to the physical building, a house in the material world and cannot exist without it. "The spaces through which we go daily are provided for by locations; their nature is grounded in things of the type of buildings" (Heidegger, 1971: 156).

Therefore, it is worth focusing on the physical notion of house in more detail to find out the differences between the diverse conceptions. The very concept of a house, a building, can be defined by the purpose of its creation, construction. Every building has the purpose of serving human needs. So, it is worth noting that the purpose of building a house may not always be living within its walls. It turns out that if the house does not serve as a place for people to live in it, then it cannot be a home. This idea can also be developed in the opposite direction, because a person who does not have a physical house (or does not live there due to whatever circumstances) can quite realistically have a home. In his exploration of what it means to inhabit the world, Martin Heidegger notes: "The chief engineer is at home in the power station, but he does not dwell there. These buildings house man" (Heidegger, 1971: 145). We can assume that the workplace is home for an engineer, but this place is not exactly a house in the form it usually is.

A revelatory example of the diverse conceptions of home is probably that of homeless people, is much as these people definitely do not have houses, but at the same time, they may have a home, because one way or another, they "live" in a certain place, a place which despite its probable limitations ensures their connection with the wider environment and which they define as a home for themselves. The very term used to

describe these people is very significant. After all, the word "homeless" literally indicates that this person has no home. At the same time, this person lives in a certain place, and can even consider it a home. It turns out that the definitely correct option would be to use the word "houseless", because this term clearly indicates that this person does not have a physical housing, a building. In talking about the "homing" effect of particular corners of the world that might provide sheltering capacities, Heidegger mentions the example of the bridge: "Things like such locations shelter or house men's lives. Things of this sort are housings, though not necessarily dwelling-houses in the narrower sense" (Heidegger, 1971: 158). Based on Heidegger's notions, it can be assumed that a person without a house can have a home. For instance, even if we expand the range of research beyond the homeless, and into the complex realities of modern life, many people never manage to buy or build their own house. However, the vast majority of people do have an experience of the home. At the same time, this situation can be viewed from another point of view; a person with a house, constructed building, can be lacking the experience of home. "Building is not identical with dwelling, but makes it possible for a dweller not only to stay for a while, but to make the world habitable and dwell in the full sense of the word" (Heidegger, 1971: 152). In a sense, the words "home" and "dwelling" can be equated in this aspect. Therefore, it can be concluded that having a home does not always mean having a house and vice versa.

Emphasizing this presumed inevitability of the experience of home, Heidegger believes that the existence of a person without a dwelling in the world is impossible: "Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth" (Heidegger, 1971: 158). Thus, it can be concluded that in order to exist in the world and to be a part of this world, to gain harmony with the environment as well as with other people, each person must have a dwelling, a place of belonging and attachment to the physical world.

At the same time, Heidegger considers human existence as a transition between spaces, so that, it would seem that there is no universal need to belong to one place. Contrarily, the philosopher asserts that people can move and exist in different spaces without losing touch with where they are. Passing through spaces, people do not deny their existence, but, on the contrary, confirm it, being among the things and places that surround them: "To say that mortals are is to say that in dwelling they persist through

spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations. And only because mortals pervade, persist through, spaces by their very nature are they able to go through spaces. But in going through spaces we do not give up our standing in them” (Heidegger, 1971: 158). Therefore, even without taking into account human existence in space, the author directly connects it with a physical place, emphasizing that all connections with the world require a physical connection with the earth: “Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling” (Heidegger, 1971: 157). So that, only a physical place (dwelling) can provide a sense of belonging and identity. After all, even moving between spaces, people return somewhere. In Cisneros’s case, the "somewhere" for Esperanza is a specific place, a house that transforms human moral values and feelings in the physical world.

The protagonist of *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza, goes through the transformation when she tries to overcome the limitations of the physical house in the transition to home, a place of belonging and self-determination. She undergoes a significant change in her perception of her house. Initially, Esperanza views the house on Mango Street in terms of its physical limitations and drawbacks. She is sharply aware of its reduced size, peeling paint, and general sense of neglect: "It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in" (Cisneros, 1984:4). Esperanza's immediate perception is rooted in a superficial understanding of what a house should be, focusing primarily on material aspects. She strives to have a beautiful, spacious house that symbolizes security: "Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (Cisneros, 1984: 4). In this initial vision of the house, we can contemplate Heidegger's theory, in which he describes that the concept of a "building" is only a physical structure that satisfies basic human needs. According to his theory, humans are tied to their dwellings; the representation of it we can see in the example of Esperanza in the novel. However, at first, the perspective of the house on Mango Street reflects her frustration and confusion, so it seems that she does not want to be "attached" to this place: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house" (Cisneros, 1984: 5). She recognizes that the house on Mango Street is her family's house, that it belongs to them: "The house on Mango Street is ours" (Cisneros, 1984:3); and accordingly, she

"associates" herself with this physical entity, although she is ashamed of it, and finds it difficult to accept the place because of its physical restrictions and shortcomings: "You live across the boulevard. That's only four blocks [...] I can see your house from my window. Which one? Come here. Which one is your house? Yes, I nodded [...] and started to cry" (Cisneros, 1984:45).

As the story progresses, Esperanza's consideration of the house begins to change and smoothly flow into the concept of home. She begins to realize that the essence of the house goes beyond its appearance. This evolution reflects the ideas outlined in Martin Heidegger's essay *Building Dwelling Thinking*. Heidegger asserts that dwelling is not just about building physical structures; it is about creating a space where people can live. Dwelling, from Heidegger's point of view, implies a deep, meaningful connection with a place where a sense of being and identity is nurtured. This concept can also include communication with other people and connection with them in these spaces. Therefore, it can be considered that Esperanza's connection with her environment and the surrounding society is nothing more but a transformation of her understanding of 'home' and 'identity'.

Esperanza has a deep and conflicted attachment to the house on Mango Street, at least because even the street itself is directly the space that binds her to the local society. It is important to note that one of the aspects defining her identity directly and undoubtedly lies in the connection with the community she belongs to. Esperanza herself describes with interest the characters that live next to her, as well as their experiences, through which she also studies life and its features, mostly complexities. She says about her peer Sally: "And why do you always have to go straight home after school? [...] You look at your feet and walk fast to the house you can't come out from. Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one [...]" (Cisneros, 1984: 82). Due to the experience of the community of which Esperanza is a part, she focuses strongly on the limitations of her position, as certainly as the house in which she lives. Heidegger writes about this physical notion of housing: "to dwell means merely that we take shelter in them (buildings)" (Heidegger, 1971: 145). In this sense, Esperanza as the other characters take shelter in their houses, they are attached to them. She

contemplates the same situation with almost all her acquaintances and friends; they all seem to be stuck and cannot go beyond these physical limits. For instance, the protagonist ruminates about her other neighbor Ruthie with some regrets: "She got married instead and moved away to a pretty house outside the city. Only thing I can't understand is why Ruthie is living on Mango Street if she doesn't have to, why is she sleeping on a couch in her mother's living room when she has a real house all her own, but she says she's just visiting and next weekend her husband's going to take her home. But the weekends come and go and Ruthie stays" (Cisneros, 1984: 69).

It is worth noting that there is no safe space as such for the main character. The standard of living in which she has grown is quite low, because the people who are represented in the novel are people in migration, the displaced who are undergoing adaptation and do not have easy living conditions. Mexican immigrants of the 1920s-1950s actually had great problems assimilating into American society. "One of the controversial aspects of the Mexican immigration phenomenon is the perception that Mexican immigrants are not assimilating to U.S. culture" (Light, Dimeji, 2008: 282). They had to confront many difficulties and hard times dealing with adaptation, so they often settled together in groups in one place, in order to live together and resist integration. "Many believe they are instead attempting to create Mexican communities within the United States that speak only Spanish and desire to remain culturally distinct from Americans, thus rejecting U.S. culture" (Light, Dimeji, 2008: 283). Thus, not infrequently, streets like Mango Street could become a safe space to some extent for migrants who found it difficult to adapt due to a number of reasons on the one hand, as well as to restrictions on development during immigration on the other. Esperanza's reaction to the danger, which she faces outside of her street along with her friends, seems to confirm this assumption. She wants to return "home" as soon as possible: "Bum man is yelling something to the air but by now we are running fast and far away, our high heel shoes taking us all the way down the avenue and around the block, past the ugly cousins, past Mr. Benny's, up Mango Street, the back way, just in case" (Cisneros, 1984: 42).

Another important aspect in determining the identity of the main character on her way to transforming a house into a home is language. Heidegger himself attaches particular relevance to language in personal self-determination; he counter intuitively

calls language the master of people: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. [...] Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, can help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first" (Heidegger, 1971: 146). The question of language is significant both for Esperanza and for the people who live with her in this community. After all, language is one of the key aspects of the concepts of belonging and home. Mainly because it is at home that one can hear the native language, and it is expressed in the words of parents since one's childhood. Language defines a person, not only as a person, an individual, but as belonging to a certain ethnic group of people, to a community. However, when you need to migrate to another country, the language aspect becomes one of the determining and sometimes problematic factors: "In 1930, 55 percent of the Mexican immigrant population could not speak English. Compared with rates among other nationality groups, this percentage was extraordinarily high"(Alvarez, 1966: 473). Consequently, we can conclude that language appeared as another "physical" limitation for Esperanza and other characters in the novel. For example, Esperanza describes Mamacita, one of the women who was never able to learn English properly, and due to it she was often embarrassed to communicate with others, or simply could not explain what she wanted to say: "¿Cuándo, cuándo, cuándo? she asks. ¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ! ¡Ay! Mamacita, who does not belong, every once in a while lets out a cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country" (Cisneros, 1984:78).

All those physical and emotional limitations described above: the marginal society in which she lives, the poor standard of living, as well as the language itself, inhibit the transformation of her perception of true home. These aspects bring her back to Heidegger's original idea: a building is only a physical entity; the house on Mango Street is just a house she just would like to change, where she got stuck. However, it is her belonging to a certain community, culture and language that gives rise to her developing identity, which leads to belonging to the house itself as a home; to the perception of this house as such a "physical beacon" that gives her the chance to exist, to really "dwell", according to Heidegger's understanding of it.

In the development of the story, the protagonist Esperanza keeps looking for a "home in her heart." We can assume that in this concept, she is referring to her personal evolution. Her basic need to physically change her home gives rise to the idea that, above all, she wants to change her position in society, and she wants a better life for herself and her community. By projecting material troubles, problems of migration and adaptation onto the house, she intends to turn it into a real home, primarily by changing herself. After all, according to Heidegger, in the modern world society has experienced a disconnection where they have lost the real significance of being in the house: "dwelling is not experienced as man's being; dwelling is never thought of as the basic character of human being" (Heidegger, 1971: 148). However, Esperanza seems to be aware of this disconnection affecting the individual in contemporary society. For her, the desire to have a physical house is mostly a projection of the desire to change one's life, to undergo a certain transformation and finally to find peace at home. The main character, regardless of the severity of her situation, is looking for strength and ways to change: "It wasn't as if I didn't want to work. I did. I had even gone to the social security office the month before to get my social security number. I needed money" (Cisneros, 1984: 53).

An important detail for our analysis, following Gaston Bachelard's theories, lies on his view of mobility, development, and transience: "It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality" (Bachelard, 1994: 61). And this is precisely the state in which Esperanza constantly and continuously lives, in a state of impermanence and partial uncertainty. After all, in order to find a sense of home and belonging, she first had to gain a sense of her own identity, and this would greatly help in clearly forming her thoughts and desires for home along with her future. In her dreams of a possible house, the protagonist is absorbed in the impermanence of development of her own desires. This is largely because her understanding of home or house is distorted by her troubled past experiences: "And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered [...], remain indelible within us" (Bachelard, 1994: 10). Her thoughts are always revolving around her dreamed vision of a house, and she does not agree to live in a state of finality, namely to accept her standard of living or work. Unlike many of the other women, she is not ready to just accept Mango Street or



the house where she now lives without any changes; finality or humility would mean betrayal of her dream or even betrayal of her identity.

So her first step in that process of self-transformation is to get a job. As a teenager, she receives a social security number and starts looking for real work. Moreover, she hopes to find “easy child labor”, which cannot be acceptable at all in modern society, because children are forbidden to be exploited in physical labor. However, the realities of migration of that time were significantly different. Eventually, she managed to find a place to work; and it even does not seem to be difficult for her, but anyway she does not feel an equal among other workers, which she experiences as menacing: "When lunchtime came, I was scared to eat alone in the company lunchroom with all those men and ladies looking, so I ate real fast standing in one of the washroom stalls and had lots of time left over, so I went back to work early" (Cisneros, 1984: 54). She is ashamed to communicate with other workers, cannot eat at the same table with them and is afraid of doing something wrong (she was obviously afraid of being fired, because she needed the money). And yet, even among a group of adults who supposedly intimidated the girl, she manages to find “a friend” who invites her to eat together or to sit and spend time during a break. However, one day he commits some violence against the girl, having previously interfered with her trust: "Then...he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (Cisneros, 1984: 55), - presumably realizing that the girl was not white American and would not be able, or even would likely not try to defend herself or tell somebody about this incident. This experience of physical labor and personal intimidation could probably be considered one of the stepping stones to her desire to move forward and become better. Thus, Esperanza wants to try the role of an author, a creative writer. She feels interested in and even passionate about reading and is also trying to create something of her own. In her situation, it was quite complicated, due to the fact, that she has no proper education, no support and no guidance in her possible creative work, as a writer. However, in Esperanza's social environment, there is a person who supports the girl's occupation and also encourages her to continue developing in this creative sphere. Aunt Lupe always carefully listens to Esperanza with fascination, especially at the times she reads various

stories and poems. The aunt believes that the path of a writer is one of the most likely opportunities for the protagonist to become free and finally get rid of all physical limitations: "You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (Cisneros, 1984: 61). These words have an impact on the girl, and she begins to build all her dreams for the future around the idea of becoming a writer; in a big, light, and spacious house. If the house is normally assumed to provide physical and emotional protection, writing emerges here for Esperanza as a form of emotional and intellectual refuge where her conflicting experiences and frustrations can be expressed and organized, and where the chaos of Mango Street can be overcome.

Esperanza's transformation continues not only in her search for herself, for her own sake, but also in changing the lives of others. Even her name, translated from Spanish into English, means "hope." So, she strives to become a form of hope for other people, not only in her community, but also for all those who have difficult lives and are in need of changes and improvements: "Passing bums will ask, Can I come in?" I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house. Some days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs. The attic grumble. Rats? they'll ask. Bums, I'll say, and I'll be happy" (Cisneros, 1984: 87). The meeting with the local fortune tellers, whom she had asked so often about the house, was meant to remind her of what was really important, what should really be the goal and purpose for direction in life: "You must remember to come back. For those who cannot leave as easily as you. Will you remember?" - and she will always remember: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street." (Cisneros, 1984: 105). And this is another proof of her direct belonging to this society, this space, and it also describes the goal of her transformation: not just to change herself, but to change everything around her, taking care of everyone who needs it.

The life path and experience of the protagonist allows her to undergo a transformation from a little girl who only dreams of a physical house and has no sense of belonging, to an adult personality with a purpose in life, with a desire not only to change herself but also to help others change, as represented in her developing writing interests. This transformation took her from the physical framework of a house,

a building; to a place of belonging and a home, a dwelling, because having found her identity, Esperanza realized that Mango Street would always be her street, and that her house here was a place of immediate and close connection with, which she would not lose: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from." (Cisneros, 1984: 110).

### Esperanza's Rewriting of Bachelard's Poetic Home

For a better analysis and awareness of the changes of the main character, it is worth considering the concept of a house following the mostly poetic theories of Gaston Bachelard. In his remarkable work *The Poetics of Space* (1958), he explores how intimate spaces, for example, the house itself, a room or even stairs, become not only physical locations, but on the contrary —repositories of memories and emotions. Such a house, according to the philosopher, definitely becomes a place of inspiration and flight of thought. In his work, he tries to single out the meaning of the house, which Cisneros's main character is looking for: "The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (Bachelard, 1994: 6). Bachelard portrays the house as a safe space, a home, and gives it a sense of peace and unity. Here reveals the concept of home as a place that is not only a haven for dreams or a space of memory, but also a hideaway that gives a chance to let go of everyday problems and focus on one's own thoughts and dreams: "The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard, 1994:6).

Esperanza's physical description of the house does not match the notion of freedom and poetry that Bachelard brings into the concept of home, because she is overwhelmingly centered on the material aspect: "Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (Cisneros, 1984:4). It can be assumed that her physical lack of a dream house testifies to the necessity of the home itself, in the aspect in which it is described by Bachelard, namely the place of freedom, memory and dreams. Therefore, this is exactly what she really strives to achieve, because she is looking for that poetic space that will allow her to find energy, inspiration, and motives for writing. Her home should become the repository of creativity that Bachelard writes about: "When the house is happy, soft smoke rises in gay rings above the roof. If the child is unhappy, however, the house bears traces of his distress" (Bachelard, 1994: 37). Therefore, we can assume that our childhood, that place within the house, one's physical place, shape our sensibilities and how we

perceive the world around us. Having a house with physical limitations, the protagonist expresses all her flight of fantasy in the realization of an ideal house, that is, this house develops her dreams, creating idealized pictures of the future. Bachelard directly describes this situation in his study: "Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home" (Bachelard, 1994: 61). Thus, it is Esperanza's striving to have a dream house that ties into Bachelard's idea of freedom and a place of belonging.

According to Gaston Bachelard, the idea of a home, the so-called dream place, becomes a small corner of the world in the protagonist's mind. It is a place of her dreams, where she can "hide" from certain negative conditions or emotions, a place where she sometimes "runs away" to free herself.

Another important aspect of the study, on which we will focus, is Bachelard's vision of safety, security in the house for the individual, which provides shelter and space for the flight of dreams and imagination. Because even though houses like the protagonist's can give rise to dreams and hopes that will help the imagination to develop and grow, the house on Mango Street does not become a safe space, and for some characters it appears as a real prison. It should be noted that Mango Street, along with all the houses on it, becomes an undeniable jail predominantly for the female population. The main character herself reveals this gendered nature of space almost from the beginning of her story: "The boys and the girls live in separate worlds" (Cisneros, 1984:8).

If we consider the topic of home as a physical building, based on common experience and different cultures, then we can suppose that the concept of home is quite feminized. Nowadays in some various ideologies, as well as religions, a woman is presumed to stay at home and her main duty remains "home comfort" even in the realities of modern life. If we look through the historical development of women, it should be noted that in most cultures for centuries in the past, women were assigned the main role in managing the household, raising children, preparing food and maintaining order in the house. Men, on the other hand, were responsible for external affairs, work and financial support of the family. This traditional model created a persistent

association of the female role with the home. In *The House on Mango Street*, the stories told by the protagonist about the houses in her environment with the same destiny as hers, are mainly related to women. In different periods of the formation of humanity as we know it today, the home is defined as the "natural" place for women, where they can play the role of mother and wife. This ideology, which considers the woman as the keeper of the hearth, is originated in traditional religious and moral guidelines that have been preserved for centuries. It creates the idea that women's significance is straightly connected with their contribution to the household. There is a psychological component to the feminization of the home. After all, having previously analyzed the concept of home, it can be concluded that home is defined as a place of safety and emotional comfort, which in a way is associated with the figure of motherhood. This image reinforces all cultural and ideological stereotypes about women as the center of the family.

Unfortunately, not all female characters in the novel have a place of safety or emotional comfort, so the narrator herself describes the destinies of women who became "hostages" of their lives, of the condition of migration, or of their parents or husbands. Not all the characters in the story find their homes or their dreams to be liberating. Unfortunately, the novel describes and reveals many characters who experience a certain degree of imprisonment in their homes, as well as feel oppressed and restricted. The author herself is against such imprisonment, and she depicts the house as "gendered" to condemn these stereotypes.

Some female characters, who became hostages of houses on Mango Street, were also partially captive of their husbands and their parents. For instance, we can cite the story of Ruthie, who, even after getting married, does not leave her mother and the house, to which she returns again and again: "Should I go, Ma? she asked the gray shadow behind the second-floor screen. I don't care, says the screen, go if you want. [...] What do you think, Ma? Do what you want, how should I know? Ruthie looked at the ground some more. [...] Only thing I can't understand is why Ruthie is living on Mango Street if she doesn't have to" (Cisneros, 1984:68-69).

First of all, women who were left alone, without the support of their husbands, but with children, suffered: "They are bad those Vargases, and how can they help it

with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come" (Cisneros, 1983:29). Returning to the concept of a house created by Bachelard, we recall: "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard, 1994: 7). However, the meaning of such a "corner" can be lost because a woman does not feel comfortable because of caring for a large number of children. However, it is worth noting that the presence of a husband did not always improve the situation, as is the case with Rafaela: "On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (Cisneros, 1984:79). Even if Gaston Bachelard writes that "The house protects the dreamer" (6), nevertheless, for the character of Rafaela, the house is an empty and closed room from which there is no way out: "Rafaela [...] wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys" (Cisneros, 1984:80).

The situation of another character, Sally, for example, is made more complicated by the fact that her father is strict because of the religion their family follows. That is, her life is limited not only by the strictness of her father, or the rigidities of life on Mango Street, but also by the religion, which only breaks her down and leads to a lifestyle of constraints: "Sally is the girl with eyes like Egypt [...] Her father says to be this beautiful is trouble. Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home?" (Cisneros, 1984:81-82) Sally doesn't want to go home after school, which definitely doesn't make her house a place of dreams and peace: "And why do you always have to go straight home after school? [...] You look at your feet and walk fast to the house you can't come out from. Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home?" (Cisneros, 1984: 82)

Other characters are not limited by parents or husbands, or by children, but nevertheless, these consequences do not make their situation better. The character Mamacita is somewhat limited by her poor knowledge of the language and it imprisons

her within the walls of her house, restricting her movement, communication and life:"¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ! ¡Ay! Mamacita, who does not belong [...]" (Cisneros, 1984:78). The limited ability to speak and express herself constrains this character to a great extent, which is why her house becomes the only place she does not want to leave, due to the possibility of a silent existence inside. However, this house is by no means a place of dreams, rather a place of self-pity: "Whatever her reasons, whether she is fat, or can't climb the stairs, or is afraid of English, she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull. Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house [...] The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same, you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries" (Cisneros, 1984:77). As if meditating on Mamacita's quandary, Gaston Bachelard notes: "We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams" (Bachelard, 1994: 6). We can interpret it in such a way that the mentioned character never found a sense of belonging in her new place of residence, and precisely because of this she cannot have a "home" according to Bachelard's views, but only memories of what remained somewhere in the past.

In her exceptional article "Understanding Home: a Critical Review of the Literature", Shelley Mallett tries to find the reflection of different aspects of the home in literature, where she describes different views on how the concept of gender is related to the home and whether it can be feminized. Analyzing already existing texts, she relies on the works of famous writers in order to define the concept of home in various aspects. For instance, she mentions the words of Madigon: "The impact of and implications of segregated housing estates on women has also been examined. In these contexts women are often socially isolated, have a diminished capacity for paid employment and participation in wider communal and political spheres and often feel fearful, physically vulnerable and insecure" (Mallett 77: Madigon et al., 1990). These words largely describe the situation of the female population in experiences of



migration, which directly weakens the rights of women and worsens their circumstances. Life in such conditions and adaptation in a new country is quite difficult for all members of this community. However, the existence of women in that environment, who are simply physically weaker and sometimes unable to help themselves or defend themselves, led them to a worse situation. It can be contemplated on the example of the protagonist herself. For Esperanza, it is important to find her identity, understand her inner desires and realize where she belongs, but it is indeed much harder to do so when basic needs such as food, money or safety are not met. She herself becomes a victim of violence not far away from her own house, having trusted another character: "Sally, make him stop. I couldn't make them go away. I couldn't do anything but cry. Sally, you lied, you lied. He wouldn't let me go" (Cisneros, 1984:100). And in addition to this traumatic experience of sexual abuse, she is once again a victim of violence, which occurs during her first work experience: "He said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. [...] he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (Cisneros, 1984: 55). Despite the incredibly difficult fate and hardships Esperanza goes through as a young girl, she manages to maintain clarity of mind and awareness of her aspirations for her future.

Thus, the work of Sandra Cisneros strongly supports the statement of Madigon. Certain vignettes of *The House on Mango Street* respectively describe the predicament of women in various aspects of their limitations. For instance, in the section "Alicia Who Sees Mice," Alicia is forced to take on the role of a mother after the death of her own, taking care of the house and her father. In this way, she is as if imprisoned in her own house: "Alicia, whose mama died, is sorry there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas" (Cisneros, 1984:31). She struggles between the desire to get an education and the duty to be a "good daughter", which reflects the pressure on women to stay within the walls of the home and fulfill the obligations of a "woman", which to some extent are imposed stereotypes of society. The vignette "Marin" depicts a young woman waiting for a man to lead her out of Mango Street and "save" both her house and her life from imprisonment. Her future is limited by the expectation that her husband will lead her to a better home, emphasizing women's dependence on men to

achieve a better life: "What matters, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them" (Cisneros, 1984:27).

Analyzing this aspect and turning to Bachelard's poetic definition of the house, it should be noted that Cisneros is partially critical of the philosopher's work, as she considers his theorizations of the home to be slightly prejudiced and not fully objective: "In a class discussion of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, she came to this realization: 'the metaphor of a house, a house, a house, it hit me. What did I know except third-floor flats. Surely my classmates knew nothing about that' (Cisneros, 1987 : 69-72). In Bachelard's definitions and concepts, the house is definitely a space of freedom and dreams: "the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard, 1994: 6); however, according to Cisneros and many other critics, such concepts are quite controversial and not fully acceptable from a gendered perspective. Julian Olivares in his article "Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and the Poetics of Space" notes: "A man born in the upper crust family house, probably never having to do 'female' housework and probably never having been confined to the house for reason of his sex, can easily contrive states of reverie and images of a house that a woman might not have, especially an impoverished woman raised in a ghetto" (Olivares, 1980: 160). The author largely condemns Bachelard for his limited views on the meaning of home and house for the female population, explaining: "With Bachelard we note a house conceived in terms of a male-centered ideology." (Olivares, 1980: 160)

Therefore, can we definitely agree with Bachelard, accepting all his definitions of home as a space of dreamers? Sandra Cisneros would probably think otherwise. Her work acts as a restraint of his theory and vividly illuminates the concept of home as an aggravating place, a place of imprisonment. At the very beginning of the novel, Rosa Vargas is presented as a victim of the home and the children within it: "Rosa Vargas' kids are too many and too much. It's not her fault you know, except she is their mother [...]" (Cisneros, 1984:29). Probably, her home is not just a prison, but also a space of servitude for her, since she has no help and is unable to cope with the difficulties of fate even within the walls of her own home: "how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every

day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how they came" (Cisneros, 1984:29).

The next part of "The Family of Little Feet" explores how society shapes female sexuality and how for instance, simple attributes like high heels are sexualized and can even become dangerous for a woman: "Yes, little girl. Your little lemon shoes are so beautiful. But come closer. I can't see very well. Come closer. Please" (Cisneros, 1984:41). The same part clearly shows that young girls are forced to stay inside the house to avoid the dangers of the outside world: "Bum man is yelling something to the air but by now we are running fast and far away,[...] up Mango Street, the back way, just in case" (Cisneros, 1984:42). Many other previously mentioned characters in the study, such as Mamacita or Sally, or perhaps Ruthie, can only confirm the partial disagreement of the author Sandra Cisneros with the ambiguous thoughts of the philosopher.

Hence, analyzing the different characters of the novel, we can assume that the author herself cannot fully agree with Bachelard's over-poetic and optimistic view of the house: "The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard, 1994: 6). Cisneros considers this definition rather unfair to women, who become hostages or prisoners of their homes. As well, the houses themselves become a feminized environment, giving rise to many stereotypes.

Analyzing the situation of the protagonist Esperanza in the novel, we can conclude that she, like other female characters, is a "prisoner" in her own home. She faces gender expectations that restrain her options. In their culture, women are often expected to follow traditional roles, the main value of which is to become wives and mothers. As a matter of fact, they will serve the men and take care of the house. For instance, the character of Minerva, who marries young and regularly endures domestic violence, but does not have the strength to leave her husband. These women live under conditions where their desires and dreams do not matter, and their roles are reduced to serving others. Esperanza lives with her restricted personal freedom, because she is a girl, as she notes that girls and women on Mango Street are often not allowed to go out on their own, they have to stay at home. These limitations on free movement become a metaphor for the wider social constraints that hold back their development. Esperanza

sees examples of this in the lives of the women around her, for example, previously mentioned characters like Rafaela, Alicia or Sally. They often sacrifice their dreams and ambitions for the sake of their family. Esperanza seems to feel restricted both by her status as a woman in society and by poverty and marginality. Her home on Mango Street symbolizes not only the physical space, but also the limitations she feels because of her family, society and place of residence. The image of her house becomes an image of limitation and imprisonment. Thus, Esperanza's striving to have her own home is a metaphor for her struggle with the restrictions placed on her as a young woman in traditional society. Her desire to change her life means a struggle for her own identity.

Throughout the story of the development of her character, Esperanza evolves and tries to get rid of the "shackles" formed by stereotypes and expectations, because of which she might become like the other inhabitants of Mango Street. First of all, she realizes that she needs to work. Her first experience with work may well be considered unsuccessful, however this is only a confirmation that she is not ready to accept and put up with her position in society and strives to change it despite everything. Esperanza turns to writing, she loves listening to and reading poetry. In the section of the novel where she supports her sick aunt, having a desire to ease her suffering, she reads books and poems for her: "I took my library books to her house. I read her stories. I liked the book *The Waterbabies*. She liked it too. I never knew how sick she was until that day I tried to show her one of the pictures in the book [...]" (Cisneros, 1984:60). In return, her aunt supports Esperanza, because she understands that this is the only way to "leave" not only her house and get a better life, but also to get rid of the burden and undesirable future that befalls many who live on Mango Street: "That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free" (Cisneros, 1983:61). The protagonist herself does not fully understand what exactly Lucy wants to say: "It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant" (Cisneros, 1984:61). Having lived a much longer life and gained more experience, Lucy wanted to convey that Esperanza, through her writing can be able to express her thoughts and feelings. Through writing, she could try to develop her own voice, with which she could carry and tell her story, as well as the stories of characters like those from different streets of migrant-populated

America. Writing should have become a way for her to express herself and escape from the constraints of her house, from the constraints of Mango Street.

The protagonist has a certain degree of internal conflict and faces an internal struggle between the necessity to conform to the expectations of society, in which she should not be different from other women and girls, and the desire for her own independence and freedom. Being a woman in Esperanza's society means bearing the burden of responsibility for her family and home, and even for the house itself, and that is why she dreams so much of her own house, which could become a space of freedom and personal choice. She dreams of not living as she is told, of not suffering from the pressure of social norms. Esperanza consciously chooses not to follow these norms; she refuses the idea of getting married young or, even worse, just staying on Mango Street. This decision she makes shows her inner strength and determination to choose her own path to a fully developed identity. Esperanza is critical not only of her home, but also of her fate and her origins: "You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of. No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if, shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong" (Cisneros, 1984:106). However, some characters from the novel try to open her eyes to her destiny, as well as remind her that it is impossible to find peace by running away from yourself: "When you leave you must remember always to come back, she said. What? When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are" (Cisneros, 1984:105).

Despite a strong internal struggle, Esperanza manages to only partially free herself from the "imprisonment" of gender and social restrictions on Mango Street. The protagonist clearly realizes that her connection to her origin and culture is an integral part of her identity, part of her being. This realization and her choice to leave this place in order to change it for the better by returning one day ("Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too. Not me. Not until somebody makes it better. Who's going to do it? The mayor? And the thought of the mayor coming to Mango Street makes me laugh out loud. Who's going to do it? Not the mayor", Cisneros, 1984:106) are indicative of her inner growth and self-discovery. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist realizes that the need to leave Mango Street does not become her

escape, which she had dreamed of before, but rather a step towards development and further improvement of her future: "I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever" (Cisneros, 1984:110). In the final vignette, Esperanza only confirms her awareness of the necessity to remember and value her belonging to her own culture and society: "What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros, 1984:110).

## CONCLUSION

The protagonist goes through a long path of development and self-discovery as the novel progresses. However, on her way she faces a number of difficulties, obstacles and misunderstanding of herself. Above all, she dreams of a house, big and spacious, that would allow her to be free from the constraints of Mango Street; this desire, the American Dream, acts as an eclipse for Esperanza in the novel. The reader sees her at the beginning of the work quite ignorant and unconscious of her desires. After all, she focuses on a material symbol, a building. However, as the story progresses, she manages to build a path of development and transformation, during which she comes to realize that she needs a home, which will become her space of freedom and self-realization in the future.

At the beginning of the novel, the young girl is initially ashamed of her house, but with her own progress, she begins to understand that this "shabby" house can be transformed into her real home, and the community in which she lives is her real family. That is why, she comes to the realization of the necessity and obligation to help everyone on Mango Street after improving her own life, as well as to come back for the many other people who are "stuck" and don't know how to change their fate on the same streets like hers.

On the way of her development, the protagonist witnesses various life situations and circumstances of other female characters in the novel. This fact greatly affects her and her vision and attitude towards her own future. These women are stuck in their homes, and have no way to escape, or even to change anything. This prompts Esperanza to discover the concept of home, not as a physical building, but as a place for self-realization and development of one's personality.

At first, in the analysis, it seems that the concepts of home and house in the novel are largely interchangeable, but as the protagonist develops her consciousness and awareness, the reader begins to realize the significant difference between these concepts. Esperanza's gradual evolution leads the reader to an understanding of home in

the Heideggerian sense, a home that reveals place of belonging, self-consciousness and identity.

In search of self-determination, she comes to writing. Her imagination finally allows her to feel at home as she writes or reads a variety of literature. The protagonist, in the end, finds her own place in creativity, which allows her to "build" her own home. This new home, reminiscent of Bachelard's idealized poetic home, would become open, welcoming, fluid and would allow her to finally "dream in peace" (Bachelard, 1994:6). A home like this can hold her memories, bring all her thoughts to life, and speak loudly about the women trapped and held hostage by Mango Street and many other streets that have another names.

Consequently, the thorny path of her development allowed Esperanza to come from physical house to the real home, the one she had in her heart and which was able to change her life.



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