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Annie Faulkners

The Pipe Dreams of Mango Street

The concept of the “American Dream” has been present in the United States since the nineteenth century. This stems from a belief that in the United States, one is free to pursue any endeavor that they wish to, and that any person from any economic class has an equal opportunity to rise up and be financially successful. However, history has shown us that everyone is not equal, and that financial success is not achievable for all hardworking people. The United States has centuries of systematically ingrained biases that make achieving success far more difficult for some people than for others. Throughout *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, the ideal of the American Dream resonates within Esperanza, her family, and the other members of their community. After immigrating to Chicago from Mexico, Esperanza’s family dreams of a better life in the United States. However, their vision of the American Dream does not come to fruition. This is exemplified throughout the novel by the dreams that Esperanza and others have, which are more often than not followed by harsh, contrasting realities. By displaying to the audience the shortcomings of varying size and severity that the residents of Mango Street experience, Cisneros illustrates the way that the American Dream is not attainable for everyone who comes to this country in search of a better life.

The premise of the very vignette that gives the novel its name, “The House on Mango Street,” is the foremost example of how Esperanza’s goals are often followed by a reality check. Their family has always dreamed of living in the perfect house, and while the house on Mango Street was finally theirs to own, it is clearly not the home of their dreams. As Esperanza explains: “the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all” (Cisneros 4). The

indignance she holds towards this living situation results in Esperanza deciding that someday she will have a house of her own, which becomes a central conflict in the novel as well as Esperanza's primary life goal. She wants to escape the impoverished neighborhood in which she lives and find safety and independence outside of the bonds of Mango Street. For Esperanza, this is her vision of achieving the American Dream. On her way to achieving this goal, however, Esperanza encounters several challenges. These obstacles on her path are representative of the overarching reality of her situation, her family's situation, and the situation of so many other characters that surround her.

In the vignette titled, "A Rice Sandwich," Esperanza wishes for something that has a different end result than what she had imagined. She decides that she wants the privilege of being able to eat in the canteen at her school, but when Esperanza achieves her goal, she learns that eating in the canteen does not live up to the glamorous standard that she had imagined. As Esperanza says, "In the canteen, which was nothing special, lots of boys and girls watched while I cried and ate my sandwich, the bread already greasy and the rice cold" (Cisneros 45). After days of imagining how fantastic it would be to eat in the canteen, Esperanza finally achieves her objective, yet the reality ended up being nothing compared to how she had thought it would be. Something that Esperanza thought would bring her joy and fulfillment ended up bringing nothing but embarrassment. Though this event is seemingly trivial, Cisneros intentionally includes the dichotomy of Esperanza's dream and her reality to demonstrate a larger image of how life often takes away the things that Esperanza and others in a similar position strive to obtain.

Esperanza is again faced with a harsh reality when she is told she must get a job. She imagines the job she could have, thinking "I thought I'd find an easy job, the kind other kids had,

working in the dime store or maybe a hotdog stand” (Cisneros 53). However, Esperanza is then quickly thrust into a job at a photo developing shop (Cisneros 54). Though the work itself is easy, Esperanza is soon approached by a much older man who assaults her (Cisneros 55). While Esperanza dreamed about what it would be like to have a job, any remaining romanticism about how it would be to join the workforce is stripped away from her by this encounter. Through this instance, Cisneros demonstrates how for Esperanza and other members of her community, the possibility of rising out of their current circumstances and achieving the traditional notion of the American Dream does not come easily. In contrast with those living in the wealthier parts of Chicago, the people of Mango Street do not always have the ability or tools needed to achieve the things of which they dream.

Esperanza is not the only character in the novel who has dreams that are not able to be attained. Alicia, much like Esperanza, has dreams of escaping Mango Street and is attending classes at a university so that she can achieve this goal. However, her mother has passed away and Alicia now has to take care of her father’s household. As her father tells her, “A woman’s place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star” (Cisneros 31). As much as Alicia wants to escape, she is still trapped on Mango Street and still the beneficiary of “her mama’s rolling pin and sleepiness” (Cisneros 31). Though Alicia has the advantage of attending college, she does not feel that she ever escapes the grasp of Mango Street. Near the end of the novel, in the vignette titled, “Alicia & I Talking on Edna’s Steps,” Alicia informs Esperanza that she will never be free of Mango Street. In response to Esperanza saying that the house on Mango Street is not a place she considers to be home, Alicia tells her, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too” (Cisneros 107). Though Alicia was the first to have the goal of

leaving Mango Street behind forever, she has failed to achieve that ambition, and believes that it will not be possible for Esperanza to be rid of Mango Street, either.

Even Mamacita comes to Chicago with dreams of her own, hoping to maintain close relationships with her family and to hold onto her culture. However, the United States forces assimilation upon her when her son admonishes her for continuing to speak Spanish (Cisneros 78), and when the baby boy begins to speak English (Cisneros 78). She came to Mango Street expecting to be able to adjust to her new home while still holding onto her customs, but she finds herself in a strange land where she does not speak the language and where her family is moving on from the way of life that she still holds onto desperately. Cisneros laments, “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 78). Though Mamacita has a different expectation for her life in Chicago than many other characters in *The House on Mango Street*, the reality of her situation is still far from what she had wished it would be.

By illustrating how the dreams that Esperanza and her friends have are often followed by crushing realities, Cisneros provides an image of how difficult it is to achieve the standard ideal of the American Dream from a lower-class neighborhood such as Mango Street. At the conclusion of the novel, the audience does not know if Esperanza ever comes to achieve her lifelong dream of having a house of her own that she can truly call her home and be proud of. If she never does, it is apparent how the circumstances in her life could prevent her from being able to escape the place where she has grown up. However, if she does come to have her house, the

seemingly thousands of factors that limit her ability to create a better life for herself make it all the more extraordinary that she is able to do so.

Work Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Arte Público Press, 1984.