

# Ghosts, Words, Memories and Stories in Katherine Anne Porter's "Old Mortality" and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Katherine Anne Porter was born in 1890 and she published "Old Mortality" in 1937; she was an acclaimed writer of short stories when Sandra Cisneros was born in 1954, and she had been dead for more than ten years when the latter first published *The House on Mango Street*. In spite of the chronological distance that separates both writers, and in spite of the different life experiences which determined their development, their works show the existence of certain interests in common. In this paper I explore some of these aspects of their fiction by focusing on Porter's "Old Mortality" and Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. Both works deal with the childhood and adolescence of two especially sensitive young girls, Miranda and Esperanza, who at the end of their stories still dream of a future of freedom and independence. But Miranda's and Esperanza's hopeful dreams are very different: while Miranda feels that she needs to break with her family and their stories about the past in order to be independent and "know the truth about what happens to [her]", Esperanza seems to have gone a step further, and she knows that her dream of a future life away from Mango Street will eventually bring her back to this place and its people. Thus, Esperanza shows a more complete understanding of her existence: she knows that her future dream will require her acknowledgement of the past. This means that she is ready to establish the dialogue between memory and the self which was essential in Porter's fiction and which Miranda fails to achieve at the end of "Old Mortality." In this paper I suggest that at least one of the reasons

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for the difference between these two characters' final reactions can be found in the different role of language, words and stories in both texts.

When Sandra Cisneros was born in 1954, Katherine Anne Porter had already published most of her short stories and was immersed in the twenty-year-long process of elaboration of her only novel, *Ship of Fools*, which was eventually published in 1962. In the latter half of the 1950s, Porter was approaching seventy, and according to Givner, she was beginning to feel that she was "really old" and that "time [was] running out" for her (1991: 422). In short, Porter was already an acclaimed writer of short stories when Cisneros was born, and she had been dead for more than ten years when the latter first published *The House on Mango Street*. In spite of the chronological distance that separates both writers, and in spite of the different life experiences which determined their development, their works show the existence of certain interests in common. In this paper I explore some of these aspects of their fiction by focussing on Porter's "Old Mortality" and Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*.

Both Porter and Cisneros have been praised for their special ability to render childhood experiences from a childlike perspective: while Esperanza is the first person narrator of the events in *The House on Mango Street*, Porter chooses for her story a third person narrator who often –although not always– reproduces Miranda's point of view. Both female characters are young girls endowed with special artistic sensibility and forced to live in a devalued present scene: in Miranda's case the present of decay of her childhood years is portrayed in contrast with the glories of the family legend of the past, while in Esperanza's case the present circumstances of her childhood life represented by Mango Street never come up to the expectations for the future created by her parents' stories:

They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. [...]

But the house on Mango Street is not the way  
they told it at all. (*HMS* 4)<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Miranda is constantly exposed to her family's appreciation of the present decay:

One old gentleman, however, had heard Rubinstein frequently. He could not but feel that Rubinstein had reached the final height of musical interpretation, and, for him, Paderewski had been something of an anticlimax. (*CS* 179)

We may conclude that what Miranda's southern experience in the early twentieth century and Esperanza's Chicano childhood in the late twentieth century have in common is a present of decay either in contrast with the glorious southern past of Miranda's family or in contrast with the hopeful dream of a more affluent future of Esperanza's Chicano family.

In spite of the prominence of the family past in Miranda's development, she shares with Esperanza an imaginative capacity that keeps her constantly dreaming about her future: first she dreams of her future in terms of the past and hopes she will be suddenly endowed with the prototypical attributes of a southern lady; then she forgets this dream for one that involves a more active, though equally romantic, role and she hopes that one day she will become a jockey; and eventually, as a consequence of her experiences, at the end of "Old Mortality" she is determined to define her dream simply in terms of the future ignoring her family and their stories about the past, thus asserting her eagerness for independence and autonomy.

Esperanza is also a dreamer who, in spite of her many disappointments in the past and the present, never loses her hopefulness for the future. One of the most prominent features in Cisneros's depiction of this character is the latter's tendency to render the temporal dimensions of her life in terms of space: thus, in Esperanza's account, time is usually measured in spatial rather than temporal terms:

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<sup>2</sup> From now on I will use the following abbreviations: *HMS* for *The House on Mango Street*, and *CS* for *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*.

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We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot. (*HMS* 3)

For Esperanza the past is not a year or two or three years ago; it is not last week or five months ago, but the time when they lived on Loomis, or on Keeler or Paulina. Similarly, the present is the house on Mango Street, and the future is her dream of a house of her own somewhere away from Mango Street, as she explains in the last two chapters of the novel. When Esperanza describes herself as “a girl who didn't want to belong” (*HMS* 109) in the last chapter, her attitude seems at first sight to be close to that of Miranda at the end of “Old Mortality” when she tries to assert her independence by means of breaking her ties with her family and the family legend of the past. But this similarity is only apparent, and I would like to suggest here that the hopeful determination that both characters seem to share at this point of their development is illusory and incomplete in Miranda's case, but not in Esperanza's.

Most studies on Katherine Anne Porter have emphasized the role of memory in her process of literary creation, something that the writer herself suggested in her own essays on writing (see Porter, 1991: 94, 449, 469, and Porter, 1987: 9). Robert Brinkmeyer is one of the scholars who have paid special attention to this aspect of her fiction: in *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development*, he observes not only Porter's indebtedness to memory, but also her effort to protect her present self from the tyranny of the past. Eventually, Brinkmeyer (1993: 24, 89) resorts to Bakhtin's ideas in order to point out Porter's attempt to establish a kind of dialogue between memory and the self, the past and the present in her fiction. From this perspective, Miranda's plans for the future at the end of “Old Mortality” function just as a manifestation of her failure to achieve such a balance:

Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be

romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance. (CS 221)

As the narrator suggests with these final words, as long as she chooses to ignore the voices of her family and their stories of the past, Miranda will never be able to know the truth about her present self.

In "Old Mortality" Porter makes evident that the family legend is just a romantic version of the past which contains an inner secret, a hidden message about women's actual repression by the old southern order. Since it is repressed and ignored, this secret has become a ghost that haunts the family legend from within, and it is Miranda's task to read between the lines of the old family stories in order to uncover this secret message: Miranda will not achieve self-knowledge until she becomes aware of the true meaning of the voices of the past, and only then will she be able to establish a dialogue between these voices and her present self. In other words, if she insists on being deaf to the voices of the past hidden in the family stories, she will never be able to exorcize the actual ghost that haunts her and her family. Miranda's final determination to be independent and self-aware at the expense of these voices can only presage her failure. In fact, Miranda herself seems to be aware of the incompleteness of her choice:

I will make my own mistakes, not yours; I cannot depend upon you beyond a certain point, why depend at all? There was something more beyond, but this was a first step to take, and she took it, walking in silence beside her elders who were no longer Cousin Eva and Father, since they had forgotten her presence, [...] (CS 219)

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Although she is not conscious of this and she cannot stop to think about it now, this “something more beyond” will eventually require her return to the family voices in order to exorcize their hidden ghost.

*The House on Mango Street* also ends with Esperanza’s hopeful wishes for the future, but in this case the protagonist’s determination has a more solid basis. Like Miranda, Esperanza also makes her future happiness dependent on her ability to escape from Mango Street and the present circumstances of her life:

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. One day I  
will go away.

Friends and neighbours will say, What Happened  
to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those  
books and paper? Why did she march so far away?  
(*HMS* 110)

Esperanza, “a girl who didn’t want to belong” like Miranda, fantasizes about the idea that one day she will be strong enough to say goodbye, to go away from Mango Street and the miseries and deprivations it represents for her; in other words, at first sight she wishes for a future of independence and complete liberation from her past.

But the novel does not end here: Esperanza adds a final paragraph that shows that unlike Miranda she is actually conscious of the existence of “something more beyond” and of its implications: “They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (*HMS* 110). Esperanza knows that one day she will go away just to return, just to be able to come to terms with her past, that is, with her life in the house on Mango Street and those people who inhabited her world then. In other words, she knows that she needs to get away from Mango Street in order to recover it. Esperanza’s perspective is more balanced and complete than Miranda’s, and this allows her to foresee a future of independence, away from Mango Street, which anyway will give her back her memories and her past there. In fact, the novel ends with the promise of Esperanza’s future reconciliation with the Mango Street people, in contrast with Miranda’s final decision to break with her

relatives, that is, the people who have shared her life until now. In Brinkmeyer's terms, Esperanza's attitude at the end of the novel promises the establishment of a future dialogue between memory and the self, the past and the present, a dialogue which, as in Porter's own case, will probably prove a solid basis for the further development of the literary inclinations that Esperanza shows in the novel.

References to books, paper, words, stories, etc. abound in *The House on Mango Street* because Esperanza tends to translate everything in her life into literary terms, and the novel itself becomes the most evident result of this tendency: the house on Mango Street is the novel and the novel is the house on Mango Street/*The House on Mango Street*. Moreover, when Esperanza dreams of her future house, she wants it to be "clean as paper before the poem" (HMS 108), and when she dreams of getting away from Mango street, she plans to do so with "her bags of books and paper" (HMS 110) rather than with her bags of clothes. Again the last chapter of the novel may offer us a clue to understand Esperanza's attitude concerning the use of language and words: "I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says Goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free". (HMS 110)

Like Miranda, Esperanza is also haunted by a ghost, the ghost of the "sad red house" (HMS 110) on Mango Street, but in contrast with Porter's protagonist, Esperanza is aware of the existence of this intra-psychic ghost and tries to exorcise it through language, the only *weapon* within her reach. In this sense, Esperanza's attitude is in tune with Abraham & Torok's (1994: 125 and ff.) interpretation of the human speech as essential for the development of the process of introjection, a mental process which protects human beings from the existence of intra-psychic secrets and ghosts: from their perspective, this kind of ghosts can be exorcized only by means of rendering them in linguistic terms. Thus, Esperanza uses her words in order to deal with her ghost, not to escape from it, in contrast with Miranda, who cannot recognise the secret, the ghost hidden in the family stories and simply chooses to run away. In general, in the novel Esperanza does not resort to stories to evade talking about the surrounding reality: quite on the contrary, she uses them to come to terms with this reality. It is true that through her stories she translates her prosaic world into

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literary terms, but this also allows her to observe the real circumstances of her life from a wider perspective and more clearly:

I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I tell them after the mailman says, Here's your mail. Here's your mail he said.

I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, "And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked."(*HMS* 109)

Thanks to her stories, Esperanza can see herself as a third person, as the protagonist of a story, without forgetting her own reality as a first person: her creative capacity allows her to combine both perspectives in order to have a wider view of her reality. In other words, she can see "her sad brown shoes," without forgetting that they are also "my brown shoes."

In this sense Esperanza's attitude may remind us of Aunt Amy's words after the scandalous events which forced her brother Harry to escape to Mexico in "Old Mortality": "Amy laughed. 'Mammy, it was splendid, the most delightful trip I ever had. And if I am to be the heroine of this novel, why shouldn't I make the most of it?'" (CS 189). Aunt Amy feels as the protagonist of a novel, and she is determined to "make the most of it". But, in contrast with Esperanza, Amy is not the writer of this novel: she uses the expression If I am to be, which suggests that she feels forced to act as the heroine of a novel written by others, in this case Harry and Gabriel, who have translated a trivial event into the terms of a chivalric romance according to her. In "Old Mortality," Amy feels that she is being reduced to the status of a fiction character, a third person, at the expense of her real self: in other words, her role as the protagonist of a novel means a threat for her self as a first person. From this perspective, Amy's determination to "make the most of it" implies her last desperate attempt to make her own voice, her own words, heard. In contrast with Esperanza, who lives her real life and translates it into her own stories because this helps her face her reality, Amy sees herself forced to adapt and transform her real life and her real self in order to make them fit a romantic literary model: that is, she is deprived of her real life and self for the sake of being the



heroine of a romance. Apparently, her death represents her final defeat and reduction to the status of a fiction character made of words in the family legend: The woman in the picture had been Aunt Amy, but she was only a ghost in a frame, and a sad, pretty story from old times. She had been beautiful, much loved, unhappy, and she had died young (CS 173).

For Miranda and her sister Maria, Amy is just a ghost, a story made of words. But Amy's decision to "make the most of it" haunts the family legend from within with its hidden message of female repression and rebellion.

Esperanza finds in her words and stories a *defensive weapon* that helps her face the ghost of Mango Street, that is, the ghost of her present reality, but in "Old Mortality," the family stories devour the reality and have a devastating effect on their characters. It is not surprising that at the end of the story Miranda interprets the human speech as a dangerous instrument in the hands of her family rather than as a *defensive weapon*: the words of her relatives represent a threat for her own words, and she feels that the family stories overshadow her own. For this reason she chooses to repudiate them in order to protect her own *text*, which she wants to be completely independent, thus ignoring Bakhtin's basic stand on dialogism:

One's own discourse is gradually and slowly wrought out of others' words that have been acknowledged and assimilated, and the boundaries between the two are at first scarcely perceptible. (1986: 345)

Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. (1986: 354)

Thus, even Miranda's final attempt to close her mind "stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend [that is, the words] of the past" is doomed to failure. Her words can never be completely independent: she cannot prevent the interaction between her own words and those of her family stories because they constitute her essential background.

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Summarizing, Miranda's final attempt to break with her family and her past in order to know the truth about herself proves her ignorance of something that Esperanza has already learnt at the end of her novel, that "Mango Street, sad red house, [is] the house I belong but do not belong to" (*HMS* 110).

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