

The More, the Merrier; the American Dream in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, an Extrinsic Material Nightmare

Cuanto más, mejor. El sueño americano en La casa en Mango Street, una pesadilla material y extrínseca

ABSTRACT: Sandra Cisneros's renowned novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984) approaches fundamental issues such as cultural identity, gender and ethnicity put in relation with the hopes and ambitions of Esperanza, a young Chicana living in a barrio in the 60s, with all this entails. Esperanza's view on Mango Street is deeply enrooted in the endemic materialism that is a quintessential part of the American dream. With this in mind, this paper will aim to analyze *The House on Mango Street* by discerning the definitory principles of the American dream in the scope of economic status and the revisited concepts of psychological and economic well-being. Through this examination, the contrast between financial goals and actual happiness will be proven central in the development of its main character and her final reaffirmation as Chicana.

KEYWORDS: Chicana, American dream, materialism, well-being, *The House on Mango Street*

RESUMEN: La reconocida novela *La casa en Mango Street* (1984), por Sandra Cisneros, afronta asuntos tales como la identidad cultural, el género y la etnicidad en relación a los sueños y ambiciones de Esperanza, una joven chicana, habitante de un barrio empobrecido del Chicago de los 60. La visión de Esperanza sobre Mango Street está fuertemente enraizada en un materialismo endémico, quintaesencia del sueño americano. Con esto en mente, el presente escrito tratará de analizar *La casa en Mango Street* atendiendo al discernimiento de los principios definitorios del sueño americano en términos económicos y la revisión de los conceptos de bienestar psicológico y material. A partir este examen, el contraste entre metas financieras y felicidad se evidenciará como conflicto central en el desarrollo de su protagonista y en su su proceso hacia la reafirmación final como chicana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Chicana, Sueño americano, materialismo, bienestar, *La casa en Mango Street*.

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Introduction

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, first published in 1984, is one of the most significant works of Chicano literature to this day. In accordance with its popularity and importance in the American canon, this short novel has been the object of multiple and profound studies concerning Latina identity, gender roles and ethnicity in modern America, among other topics (Martín-Rodríguez, 1995, p. 79; Rivera, 2003, p. 255). However, regardless of how fundamental those questions are in the creation and reception of the book, not many scholars have addressed the issue of how economics is perceived and affect storytelling. In fact, I will argue that Esperanza's hopes are very explicitly material from the beginning of the novel and that this elemental materialism is essential to understand the character's journey and her views of the world.

Therefore, instead of solely focusing on the central conflict between gender, ethnicity and diverse cultural values, as most of the scholars have approached this literary work (Cruz, 2001, p. 918), this paper will explore the concept of the American dream and its endemic materialism to analyze not only Esperanza's dreams but also how this notion undergirds the development of her character. Nonetheless, in order to fully comprehend these relations, some vital theoretical concepts must be defined and delimited before approaching the text: the American dream and its components, especially those related to economic status, well-being and its relationship with identity and materialism, and the crucial distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic goals.

The American dream revisited:

the role of happiness and well-being

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the American dream as "a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the US especially by working hard and becoming successful." This definition, while quite simplistic, does contain some of the key points to which authors such as Cullen (2003), Newlin (2013) or Bloom (2009) direct their discussions. First, the phrases "way of living" and "thought of by many Americans" certainly entail various significant implications: the demarcation of some cultural values, the mythical and ideal nature of the American dream, and its popularity and prevalence. Another elemental idea is its feasibility by "anyone" through hard work within the American territory, which will be further discussed in the light of this novel. Finally, it is notable that the adjective "happy" is indeed highly abstract and open to interpretation in essence. Nevertheless, since the scope of this paper is materialism, I will relate this notion to ideas such as well-being, comfort, and goals' fulfillment in order to operate a more concrete idea.

These principles have supposedly remained part of the American national perception, even subconsciously, since the creation of the country (Izaguirre, 2014, p. 11). No wonder its bases are famously protected in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." However, from an economic perspective, it

must be noted how easily these concepts apply to a capitalist system, and how they have ended up supporting free trade and the free market, pushing the mentality of pursuing material growth through individualism.

The relationship between the American dream, Capitalism and how politics have been evolving in the US to this day deserves special attention. Many scholars would say that the liberal values and principles extracted from the bases of the American dream (individualism, meritocracy, and materialism) are more than enough to support a direct correlation between both concepts (Ehrenreich, 2016, p. 17). However, there exists the fundamental question of the newcomer: the start from nothing and their growth by hard work, which, while an essential part of the American dream, is extremely hard to propel in a purely capitalistic system in the absence of specific measures to fight exclusion and inequities (Anguiano *et al.*, 2011, 89).

The American dream has not been static but has transformed over the years and adapted to very diverse historical contexts. In fact, according to Jim Cullen, its meaning has greatly changed and become more sophisticated since the birth of the USA, although it has always been rooted in Puritan thought and the ideals of individualism and meritocracy (Cullen, 2013, p. 6). It is at this point where three main components of the aforementioned idea arise: the Dream of Upward Mobility, closely related to the Dream of the Immigrant, the Dream of Equality, and the Dream of Home Ownership.

From a historical standpoint, it is notable how the American dream has transitioned from a prominent foundational

principle to a challenged ideal in contemporary times. This shift is especially apparent if contrasted with the institutional reality of the country and the preeminence of socioeconomic demographic data that could be easily interpreted as evidence of systemic racism (Ehrenreich, 2016, p.9). In fact, the application of this national aspiration to racial minorities results in the revelation of inequities that particularly affect fundamental aspects of everyday life such as employment and housing (Anguiano *et al.*, 2011, p. 11), both issues that are crucial in the novel and Chicana literature as a whole.

Following Ehrenreich's theorization regarding the evolution of Capitalism in relation to the American dream, we must mention that the time when the action is set in *The House on Mango Street* would correspond to the formation of the Third Wave Capitalism in the US. This new kind of Capitalism engages with historical national bases, the American dream fundamentally, as well as with notions such as free-market or productivity, but differs from previous eras in the failing of public action against private interests and uncontrolled growth (Ehrenreich, 2016, p. 47). This would cause the intellectual fracture between individual problems and social issues and the systematic marginalization of "the commons" through a process of blaming the poor, as upward mobility would be theoretically possible within the system by means of endeavor. Therefore, racial disparities that effectively exist exacerbate through the expectations of economic progress, socially accepted as possible, but almost impossible to achieve for certain groups, including the Chicano.

Another core question of the novel, especially if examined from this study's standpoint, is happiness, which, as I already mentioned, will be encapsulated within the notion of well-being. Psychologists suggest that, although both terms must be treated differently, happiness is indeed a part of well-being (Ed Diener et al., 2009, p. 1) and, additionally, when analyzing the latter, it is possible to find two very significant complementary interpretations. These authors, in accordance with most of the current theorists on happiness, divide well-being in its objective and subjective counterpart. Happiness would correspond to subjective well-being within that framework, and can be generally defined as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life" (Ed Diener et al., 2009, p. 68).

Similarly, Carol Ryff describes psychological well-being as a construct comprised of six factors: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy and positive relations with others (Ryff et al., 2006, p. 5). In contrast, the Council on Social Work Education (2006) defines economic well-being as having a present and future financial security, which entails the capacity of meeting basic needs, such as housing, clothing and education, and control over daily finances, as well as sense of security, satisfaction, personal fulfillment and the ability to accomplish financial goals.

One final distinction must be delineated in the light of a study carried out by Tim Kasser and Richard M. Ryan. In an attempt to assess how psychological well-being is achieved in American society, they divide life goals into intrinsic,

those based on self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and physical health, and extrinsic, linked to financial success; appealing appearance and social recognition (Kasser and Ryan, 1996, p. 281). In their research, not only do they prove that intrinsic aspirations are significantly more effective, but they also characterize the desires for wealth and material goods as "prominent elements of the American Dream" and "potentially detrimental to well-being" (Kasser and Ryan, 1996, p. 280). Furthermore, they note that this relation is especially significant in individuals who were raised in lower-income households (Kasser and Ryan, 1996, p. 282). Another more recent study on the same topic by Carol Nickerson, Norbert Schwarz, Ed Diener and Daniel Kahneman (2003) supports this idea. In fact, in connection with the materialistic essence of the American dream, they concluded that "the negative consequences [of financial ambition] were particularly severe for the domain of family life; the stronger the goal for financial success, the lower the satisfaction with family life, regardless of household income" (Nickerson et al. 2003, p. 531).

Materialism and ambition in *The House on Mango Street*

The relationship of these ideas with the novel are clear from the beginning. As a matter of fact, the very first vignette of the book might be an excellent example to appreciate how Esperanza's voice concurs with these dynamics and conceptualizations.

We had to leave the flat on Loomis quick. The water pipes broke and the

landlord wouldn't fix them because the house was too old. We had to leave fast. We were using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons. That's why Mama and Papa looked for a house and that's why we moved into the house on Mango Street, far away, on the other side of town.

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. (Cisneros 2009, p. 4)

In her first words, Esperanza gives the reader a brief context for the story of the Cordero family. But she does it while she is narrating the most mundane vicissitudes that they have suffered in their previous residences, as she incorporates her own naïve thoughts on the topic, her goals, and her parents' unrelenting promises of improvement. The guiding principle of both levels is, however, their material nature, which, contrary to what could be thought, does not make the descriptions less emotionally charged.

What Esperanza desires is a space that only belongs to her family but, unlike the new house on Mango Street, it must meet some particular requirements: "Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 7). Considering our previous theorization, these features might relate to the following relevant ideas. First of all, the so-called Dream of Home Ownership, together with a more

implicit presence of the Dream of Upward Mobility; an unambiguous presentation of various extrinsic goals, namely financial success and social recognition; and, finally, none of the definitory principles of psychological well-being, but only those related to its economic counterpart —financial security and personal fulfillment by meeting material needs.

But there are two additional remarkable aspects in these first chapters. On the one hand, the impact of media on Esperanza's hopes, a systematic model that propels particular values and expectations and certain features for a desirable life: the dream of a place "like the houses on TV" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 4). The influence of media constitutes a vital part of Esperanza's perspective of life and the novel itself, and yet it is presented quite implicitly. It is the primary source of expectations by which the image of her dreamed house originates. Still, it also has more profound implications in her perspective of the *barrio*, which, compared to the ideal image portrayed on TV, in the 1960s especially, results in a feeling of shame and dislocation.

On the other hand, there is the core idea of private ownership. In contraposition with the "elms the city planted" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 7), a public space, Esperanza explicitly wishes for a big yard around the house. This would refer to an eminently private space, protected, delimited and separated from the outside world: a place designed for the owner, in which she is the authority, something that is generally defined as a property that does not belong to any state, not public, one of the bases of Capitalism and the right to private ownership. The treatment of the notion of private

property that the book provides becomes increasingly relevant when compared with actual data on the Latina community and home ownership. As stated in the United States Census Bureau, 73 percent of white households owned their own homes in contrast with the 47 percent of Latinos in 2017. This racial gap has remained almost identical since the 1980s (Cortes, 2007, p. 90) and it even seems to have grown since the 1970s (Sánchez, 2015, p. 20).

The House on Mango Street was published in the 1980s, and it is based on the Chicana reality in the Chicago of the 1960s. Nevertheless, I consider current data very relevant if compared with the reception of the book and its popularity to this day. The identification of the reader with Esperanza's struggles, including her dream of owning a house, responds, at least partly, to the endemic ethnic gap that still remains today regarding, for example, home ownership; the perpetuation of the obstacles that Esperanza encounters due to her identity as Chicana woman in America contributes to the timelessness of the novel.

Considering these data, it is worth to note that home ownership has a much deeper meaning than the mere possession of physical shelter in American culture. It is also a matter of autonomy and national pride. According to The White House's *Homeownership Policy Book-Background*: "From our Nation's earliest days, homeownership has embodied core American values of individual freedom and self-reliance." This is the precise reason why having a home of their own is the natural next step towards integration for Mexican American communities. Despite all the obstacles, institutional, legal or social, immigrants intend

to "buy into the American dream" (Diaz McConnell and Marcelli, 2007, p. 218), by owning a private property, a piece of the promised land.

Therefore, it does not seem casual that Esperanza's vision of the perfect house, so early displayed, and its constant comparison with the narrator's immediate reality becomes a ubiquitous image throughout the novel. However, it does not remain unchanged. In the last two vignettes of the novel, it seems clear that Esperanza's perception has mutated. Again, she refers to her house in Mango Street and its dream to leave the barrio: "One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 110).

However, the center of her description is not physicality on this occasion, but her feelings about the place, especially her sense of dispossession and lack of belonging. This is exceptionally remarkable in "A House of My Own," in which her dreamed house is depicted not only as a possession but as an expression of her freedom and herself, a space that is not hostile to her fulfillment: "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 108). That house does not longer have to be white like those on TV and have a big garden, but it must be like the snow, quiet and clean, like a blank paper, a place with her books and tales, and her own purple petunias.

When comparing the first chapter with these last ones, considering the scope of this paper, some crucial modifications can be noticed. The Dream of Home Ownership remains, of course, pivotal. Nevertheless, the Dream of Upward Mobility appears

to have diluted in a physical description that seems to have acquired a more abstract and affective meaning. Interestingly enough, size does not seem to matter that much anymore:

Not a Rat. Not an apartment in back.
Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A
house all my own. With my porch and
my pillow, my pretty purple petunias.
My books and my stories. My two
shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody
to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage
to pick up after. Only a house quiet as
snow, a space for myself to go, clean
as paper before the poem. (Cisneros,
2009, p. 108)

The same process of depletion of prominence occurs with the previously fundamental extrinsic goals since no element related to financial success or social recognition is mentioned whatsoever. Moreover, psychological well-being now arises as an essential part of Esperanza's dream, as it can be inferred from the very last words of the novel:

I am too strong for her to keep me
here forever. One day I will go away.
Friends and neighbors will say, 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, 2009, p. 110)

This shift of perspective from the material to the mental and spiritual certainly

implies an inversion of priorities for Esperanza. Therefore, at the end of the novel extrinsic goals are substituted by intrinsic goals, mainly self-acceptance, which relates to psychological growth, autonomy and self-regard, and community feeling, which also entails a need to improve reality through activism and artistic creation. Nonetheless, this process is not presented as sudden or abrupt, but it is part of an evolution. It is the result of Esperanza's traumatic experiences in *Mango Street*.

In this regard, young Esperanza's perception of friendship is particularly significant for the discussion of the centrality of economic relations in the character. The first mention to this issue takes place in "Boys and Girls," in which Esperanza wishes for a friend of her own, for her only. Again, the concept of private ownership is highlighted in this vignette. The verb "to have" averts from the common expression "to have a friend" to acquire a meaning much closer to "posses." The events described in "Our good day" confirm this material essence of friendship. In this chapter, Lucy and Rachel make an offer to Esperanza: five dollars which would be spent in a bicycle in exchange for everlasting friendship, a factor directly related to affiliation, an intrinsic goal: "If you give me five dollars I will be your friend forever. That's what the little one tells me. Five dollars is cheap since I don't have any friends except Cathy who is only my friend till Tuesday" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 14).

Esperanza's natural reaction is examining the pros and cons. She wants a better friend than Cathy, but the sisters' clothes "are crooked and old" (Cisneros, 2009,

p. 14). Finally, she concludes that the deal is worthy and gives those five dollars for the bicycle to her new two friends. The dynamics in this situation are not only material but plainly capitalist. Esperanza buys something as intangible as friendship with her money, paying to fulfill her wish. Not only that, but the fact that the sisters' clothes play a role in Esperanza's consideration suggests that physical appearance, an extrinsic goal, is a factor that has its importance in Esperanza's mindset.

A similar set of relations might be detected in "The family of little feet" and "Chanclas," in which physical appearance arises as a main concern for Esperanza. Furthermore, in these cases, social recognition is also crucial in Esperanza's perception of reality. Esperanza sees her own value in the eyes of others; she likes to be liked, and the lack of attention ultimately means that she is not desirable or important. In this sense, Esperanza's process towards sexualization is also significantly marked by her extrinsic reality. Ultimately, she is how she looks, and her still naïve perspective is continually deformed and challenged by gender roles and symbols such as the high heels. In this case, she begins thinking that the shoes will make her confident and powerful, but when she actually wears them she grasps the gruesome implications behind dressing as a grown-up.

Her vision is finally challenged in both chapters. In "The family of little feet" she realizes the true meaning of wearing high heels, so what initially put her in an elevated position ends up being a rejected object. On the other hand, the complexes caused by her old shoes disappear when her family convinces her to enjoy the party with them

in "Chanclas." This sense of belonging makes her forget about her imperfect appearance, which would mean that a material concern is replaced by an immaterial feeling of affiliation in this instance.

And Uncle spins me, and my skinny arms bend the way he taught me, and my mother watches, and my little cousins watch, and the boy who is my cousin by communion watches, and everyone says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until I forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes, brown and white, the kind my mother buys each year for school (Cisneros, 2009, p. 47).

In this context, "Gil's furniture bought & sold" might offer a new viewpoint on how material goods are valued in the novel. Esperanza finds herself moved by the sound of music coming from an old black box, an object that did not meet her initial expectations of how a music box should look. The salesman's answer to Nenny when she asks how much the item costs is definite: "This ain't for sale" (Cisneros, 2009, p. 12). This vignette might lead to two different interpretations in terms of economic relations and materialism. On the one hand, the seller could have judged the girls' appearance and interpreted that they actually could not afford his product. However, some scholars see a deeper message in this rejection: an understanding of music, of art, as something that cannot be bought, something that does not have a quantitative value in a capitalist setting. In the words of Luis Rojas-Velarde: "the lyrical description of the effect of the music

points to a wealth that is immaterial and is never explicitly considered in the text” (2003, p. 160).

Conclusion

When analyzing these chosen fragments in the scope of materialism, Esperanza’s conflict between intrinsic and extrinsic goals, economic and psychological well-being, seems to work in the same terms as that of the clash between her identity as a working-class Chicana woman and her dreams and hopes (Perez, 2012, p. 67). This opposition can be satisfactorily explained if the narratives of the American dream within the system are taken into consideration. The way in which the myth, mainly materialistic and ethnically white (Sternheimer, 2011, p. 16), deals with cultural duplicity is pushing the subject towards the assimilation of certain highly wealth-oriented values.

However, what Esperanza faces in her inability to achieve economic independence is a double disillusion: her cultural background, which reinforces additional burdens for women; and the dominant social system, that does not allow people of her kind to overcome their exclusion (Fernández Leost, 2014, p. 7; Guerra, 2013, p. 239). In this context, the American dream, even though it is an abstract concept, manifests in extrinsic material goods; it creates expectations, but Esperanza’s immediate reality develops contradictory values and prospects. This disparity motivates the realization that something is corrupt in the system, impelling Esperanza towards activism, community feeling, coming back to Mango Street.

The comparison between the beginning and the end of the novel reveals that

the primary source of unhappiness and frustration is always material, the extrinsic discontent that becomes one with injustice (Rojas-Velarde, 2003, p. 167). Esperanza’s storytelling conveys a high degree of dissatisfaction caused by her materialistic ambitions and their contrast with her reality. Nevertheless, the older Esperanza operates a concept of happiness founded on the principles of personal freedom and self-fulfillment, a space of harmony with herself, her identity, leaving aside the systemic corrupted expectations.

Ultimately, the dreamed house depicted in the first and last chapters is not the same. There has been a transition from a home with “stairs inside like the houses on TV”, “basement and at least three washrooms” and a “big great yard” (Cisneros, 2009, p. 4) to “a house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories” (p. 108), from dissatisfaction to hope, as Elenita, the witch predicted, “a home in the heart” (p. 63). This evolution or transposition of values based on the negative influence of materialism supports the consideration of this work as a coming-to-age novel (Shobia and Aruna, 2016, p. 36), as it confirms the centrality of the opposition between materialistic goals and well-being.

Considering all the above, it is worth mentioning that the novel’s ending, Esperanza leaving Mango Street, could be interpreted as a triumph of the American dream. If that is the case, it would mean that, in the end, the dream of Upward Mobility, the dream of Home Ownership, and the dream of Equality have prevailed through individualism and meritocracy despite Esperanza’s initial doubts and cul-

tural limitations. Nevertheless, Esperanza wants to return to Mango Street; she feels the urge to help people like her, “the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros, 2009, p. 110). By embracing what she is, a Chicana woman, Esperanza is able to focus on her own well-being, not the economic, but the psychological, and from that realization, she feels entitled to pursue her independence, peace and happiness, her new home. In her story, the American dream, like in many other works in the American canon, is depicted as an illusion (Izaguirre, 2014, p. 57) by which the imposition of materialistic goals forces the character to suffer the incongruities of her identity, her ambitions, and reality.

In “The American Dream in the Chicano Novel,” Márquez points out that “the theme of a people seeking America, finding it, achieving the dream, or conversely suf-

fering disillusionment and exploitation, has produced extraordinary works that have enriched American literature” (Márquez, 1986, p. 4). However, he also claims that Chicano literature has assimilated that idea and turned into the “American nightmare” by contrasting the myth with Chicana reality, and by exposing the conflict between the dream and their experience as a community. This conceptualization can perfectly apply to *The House on Mango Street*. By inverting the paradigms from extrinsic to intrinsic, the American dream becomes Esperanza’s dream, a dream that favors psychological well-being—self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy and positive relations with others—and also intrinsic goals—self-acceptance, affiliation, and community feeling; that is, a lucid dream after the American nightmare.

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