

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*: Experiencing Poetical Prose

(Essay and Lesson Plan)

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What does it mean to have "lazy hair" or hair that "smells like bread?" How can a name be "muddy" or sound as if it were made out of "tin?" What do front porch steps "all lopsided and jutting like crooked teeth" look like? How can a pair of small black dogs "leap and somersault like an apostrophe and comma?"

As English and ESL teachers we want to assist our international students with acquiring the skills to communicate effectively in their target language; however, we also realise that there is so much more to language mastery than the memorisation of vocabulary and sentence patterns or knowledge of grammar and punctuation rules. Most of us also want our students to be familiar with the beauty and power of English, with the possibilities of words and phrases to evoke emotions and create sensory impressions. By incorporating literature into the ESL classroom - poetry, drama, fiction- we can assist our L2 learners with the nuances and creativeness of their new language.

In a recent college-level literature course I used Sandra Cisneros' book *The House on Mango Street* (Vintage Books, 1989). This class was comprised of twelve students (average TOEFL 550) representing five countries. Our special focus for this course was the term the "American Dream." Through a variety of readings and perspectives, we tried to come to a deeper understanding of this mercurial concept. Even though Cisneros' novel addresses pertinent issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class (general themes we were exploring in the course), it proved to be far more of a linguistic tool, helping my class to understand language on a variety of sensory levels. In this text we moved beyond what was being said (the story) to study carefully and to feel how it was being said (the style).

The power of this novel lies not only in the story of Esperanza, a worldly yet naive Latino girl struggling to grow up in Chicago's poverty-stricken south side, but also in the fresh, poetic and very imaginative language employed. The text is written in a series of short, interlocking vignettes that trace the maturation of Esperanza and allow us, the reader, to view the world through her keenly observant eyes. Like a colorful kaleidoscope, the story spins and whirls around Esperanza and her world, full of diversity, texture, and meaning.

Prior to reading the text I employed some pre-reading strategies. As a class we discussed aspects of Latino culture in America, growing up in an impoverished neighborhood and cultural gender biases. Students were also asked to think about how this novel related to the theme of the course, the American Dream.

Because of the level of this course, students were familiar with key literary terms like narrator, plot, metaphor, simile, and symbolism. Our class met once a week for three hours, so students were expected to read the novel before our meeting and to take notes and compose questions to bring to class discussions. As a homework assignment, I also had students draw certain aspects of the text. By counting off numbers in class, students were assigned drawing "homework." They were asked to draw images from factual evidence found in the text, like the house on Mango Street, Mamacita crawling out of the taxi, or Esperanza dancing with her uncle. My goal was to examine close-reading skills and to see how images from the written word translated into the visual. I wanted to make Cisneros' words, the scenes from the novella, jump to life.

Most students connected immediately to Cisneros' "approachable" style, and the use of short, boldly entitled chapters (most are only one or two pages) really helped to keep readers focused. By having thematic topics broken into "bite-size chunks," students felt more comfortable with the novel experience and less intimidated by the printed page. Each brief chapter acted as a window into Esperanza's world, Mango Street, and allowed us to become familiar with her as she narrated stories about her neighborhood.

The first part of the two hour and forty-five minute class was spent in collaborative learning groups to build confidence in interpretation before discussing ideas in the larger group (about 50 minutes). I passed out index cards that contained questions pertaining to the text that I wanted addressed in class discussion. Each card asked students to move from a concrete visual image that could be supported by the text to a more abstract concept that would require the synthesis of ideas and stimulate critical thinking. Each group used a critical approach to interpret the story: tapping into their abilities to visualize the language; looking carefully at evidence from the book; drawing upon collective imagination; articulating abstract concepts that are not easily defined.

GROUP 1 - Please write your answers on a separate sheet of paper to be given to me

1. Describe Esperanza. Can you find specific places in the book where she is described physically? Emotionally?
2. What kind of girl do you think she is? What are her feelings, hopes, dreams, fears?
3. How might she define the "American Dream?"

GROUP 2 - Please write your answers on a separate sheet of paper to be given to me

1. Describe Esperanza's family. What do we know about her mother, father, brother and sister? Can you find places in the book where they are discussed?
2. What kinds of dreams do you think Esperanza's parents have for their children?
3. How would they define the "American Dream?"

GROUP 3 - Please write your answers on a separate sheet of paper to be given to me

1. Describe the house on Mango Street and the neighborhood around it. Who lives there?
2. Who are Esperanza's friends?
3. Most of the people in the neighborhood are Latino (of Spanish heritage) and they are poor. Based on the book, what have you learned about Latino culture? About American culture?

These collaborative groups were arranged carefully, trying to strike a complementary balance between students' levels, abilities and nationalities. They had ample time to discuss, find relevant proofs within the text, and exchange ideas about what they had read and interpreted. During this group time I floated, eavesdropping and trying to stay as silent as possible for this was their time with the text. Most students responded favorably to the characters and story and were eager to exchange ideas. Some questions did not have exact answers and thus demanded that students collaborate and use their own notes and ideas to deduce and to infer information. For example, one chapter, Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark, tells us more about papa's character than his appearance, so students must "create" him based on what they have learned. They begin to build visual images based upon a verbal context, thus making for a richer and more sophisticated reading experience.

As the groups began to wind down, we pulled our materials together and reconvened in a circle to share what we had discovered. Once the class was reassembled, students were asked to show the artwork they had completed as homework (about 30 minutes). I had created the drawing topics by having at least two students respond to each assignment. For instance, I asked two students to recreate the character of Esperanza on the page, two to draw her friends, Rachel and Lucy, two to explore the diverse neighborhood on Mango Street, etc. Where in the text, or which scene, they chose to draw for illustration was left up to the individual. Needless to say, there were some highly original, creative and fun responses, ranging from pen and ink sketches to full color acrylic renderings. We laid them out on the floor and took turns commenting on the style, technique and accuracy of each, referring to the text to look for evidence. Everyone enjoyed seeing another person's creative mind at work, and this aspect of the lesson allowed us all a few minutes of "down time" in which we could switch from academic mode to something a bit more frivolous. After sharing their artwork, students were ready to address the next level of discussion.

The groups were then asked to discuss the questions they had tackled together (about 60 minutes). Each group of four posed their questions to the rest of the class, waited for responses, discussed possible points of view, and then clarified their own answers. What was so rewarding was that each small group had, in essence, become a kind of "expert" on its topic and was really ready to share ideas because the members felt confident. The students were teaching one another what they had discovered from the text, and I found that I was only there to listen, learn and assist with any difficult concepts.

It was very exciting for me as a teacher to watch the microcosm of a small group grow, adapt, and become comfortable within the larger environment. The students felt confident that they had read and understood an entire novel and that they were able to critique it

for each other. Almost everyone had a favorite chapter or character and most were eager to share their findings. Many even discovered and brought to discussion Cisneros' unique ability to write poetic prose. (For examples, please refer to the introductory paragraph; all these questions were student generated in the class.) If a passage were particularly well liked, someone would read it aloud,

pointing out the words or phrases that pleased the ear or conjured up striking images. Through this novel my student were actually enjoying the English language on a variety of levels: smelling it, tasting it, and seeing it.

Did every student understand every aspect of this novel? Was every vocabulary word defined? No, of course not, but those were not our goals. What was learned was how to "unpack" a story, to experience it on as many levels as possible ... to hear words for their beauty, to visualize them for their images, and to recreate images via our own creative process. In the wake of this multifaceted discovery process, learning most assuredly occurs. Still, the "teacher" voice inside of me wondered whether students had fully grasped some of the deeper themes addressed in this text. Since the bulk of our class time was spent learning collaboratively and looking carefully at the use of language, I was thrilled to learn later that, yes, most students had interpreted some of Cisneros' issues.

Along with reading and discussing literature, students in this course were also responsible for responding in essay style to two readings they selected. They would bring their papers to class on the assigned day (with enough copies for all class members) and present their papers aloud to the group. I found these readings to be especially fruitful, as each student really had a "voice", and some of the ideas raised were exciting, provoking even more in-depth discussion. The students were learning about style and creativity from one another, and the presentations allowed them a safe environment in which to practice oral skills.

Excerpts from Students

The following excerpts are from two students, one from Taiwan, the other from Bulgaria, who chose to write about *The House on Mango Street*. These students brought their response papers to class on this day, and we spent the last 40 minutes reading and discussing them as a class. Without any prompting from me, it is evident that these young writers are trying to emulate Cisneros' style. These students have discovered that literature can be used as something to write about and that it can be a powerful writing model as well; reading literature assists with voice, style, syntax and language. These two representative essays are packed with poetic style, and both authors explore the subtleties of language using symbolism, metaphors and similes. It is also clear that both authors understood the book thematically as well. The Taiwanese student honed in on the theme of immigrants and how people can feel "uprooted" or "transplanted." He wrote about what the mango tree symbolises for him -- a living, growing entity bound by a clay pot. The second author, a sophomore, opted to focus upon the complex world, both internal and external, where *Esperanza* lives, a world where status, wealth and race are issues. Her style is clearly influenced by the novel.

From The Taste of Mango Fruit (Taiwanese student)

There is mango tree in my parents garden. The mango tree belongs to the little garden, the little garden belongs to a little one floor apartment, and the little apartment belongs to my dear parents. The mango tree lives with our family for a long time. Every summer we enjoy the mango fruits from it. Only a few fruits we can eat because the mango tree is raise in a big pot not ground. "Why?" "In the near future, all of us will go back to our homeland." My grandmother told us children in my childhood. "Where is our homeland, grandmother?" "It is mainland China."

From Hunger for Real Life (Bulgarian student)

A real life is expensive! It is comfort and safety which immigrants can not have. It is a privilege. It is hard to get in. Everyone's dream is to have a "real house," a "real name," a "real man." It is Sandra Cisneros's too ... Her book is constructed like a necklace made of stones. Each story has its own charm, weight and bitterness. But when strung together I can feel the complete description of their presence.

I suppose that for a language teacher who loves her subject there is nothing more gratifying than to see her students start to love it, too. By exposing students to engaging, interesting works and by letting them have fun with the experience, we are teaching them about their target language as well as exposing them to the rich and diverse cultures, which reside in America. If they enjoy the experience, they will keep reading and thinking! I know a reading has been a success when students ask, "Do you know any other books by this person?" and when their own writing begins to reflect an awareness of the power and beauty of words.

Closing

This is a wonderful novel to teach to international students! Also, there are numerous, web sites that can be incorporated into the lesson plan and/or used for preparation of the lesson.

References

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