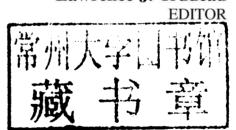
Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 352

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Lawrence J. Trudeau





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Preface

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Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

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Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews selected from hundreds of review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning an author's career from its inception to current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other works that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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The House on Mango Street Sandra Cisneros

The following entry provides criticism of Cisneros's novel *The House on Mango Street* (1983). For additional information about Cisneros, see *CLC*, Volumes 69, 118, 193, and 305.

INTRODUCTION

The House on Mango Street is among the most read and studied novels in Chicano literature. The story is narrated by Esperanza Cordero, a young Chicana and aspiring writer growing up in the 1960s in a tough Mexican American area of Chicago. A witness to the drudgery and abuse suffered by most women in her neighborhood, Esperanza struggles against poverty, sexism, and middle-class prejudice in her quest for a better life. Winner of the 1985 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, The House on Mango Street has since sold over two million copies and is regularly found on grade-school, high-school, and college reading lists. The House on Mango Street has attained canonical status for its exploration of race, ethnicity, class, and gender within a multicultural context. Speaking from Esperanza's youthful perspective, Cisneros uses deceptively simple language to critique a mainstream American culture that subordinates minorities as well as aspects of Chicano culture that condition women to be subservient. Recognized as a groundbreaking work of Chicana feminist literature, the book was instrumental in efforts to expand the literary canon to include the work of minorities and women.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

The House on Mango Street is an unconventionally structured bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story documenting an adolescent protagonist's transition from innocence to maturity over the course of a year. Unlike the linear arrangement of the typical bildungsroman, Esperanza's narrative is disjointed and episodic, consisting of forty-four interconnected chapters, or vignettes, written in a style that blends prose and poetry. The chapters, which range in length from two paragraphs to four pages, relate foundational events from Esperanza's life and the lives of her neighbors and family. While each of the chapters can stand independently, together they constitute a composite novel that charts Esperanza's passage from childhood to adolescence. The opening chapter establishes the metaphor of the house as crucial to Esperanza's identity formation. She explains that, after years of moving from one dilapidated rental property to the

next, the Cordero family finally occupies a home of their own. But the realities of the one-bedroom house, which all six members of the family share, with its crumbling bricks and tiny windows, contrast radically with "the houses on T.V." that Esperanza longs for. The "sad red house" on Mango Street becomes for Esperanza an emblem of the poverty and shame she is determined to escape.

The new life Esperanza imagines for herself is constructed primarily in reference to the women in her family and neighborhood. Her great-grandmother and namesake is a strong woman forced into marriage and consigned to a life of looking out the window, "the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow." Esperanza's mother, who quit school early to raise a family, forever regrets that she "could've been somebody." Esperanza's teenage girlfriends, with whom she discovers her budding sexuality and shares stories about boys, learn that their beauty makes them vulnerable. Parading down the street in handme-down high-heeled shoes, they are subjected to the leering gaze and salacious remarks of a vagrant standing outside a bar. Later, while Esperanza waits for her friend Sally at a carnival, she is accosted by a group of boys and raped by one of them.

Pretty Sally exemplifies all the women of Mango Street who are trapped and exploited by men. She marries in the eighth grade to escape an abusive father obsessed with her virginity only to wind up with a domineering husband who refuses to let her talk on the telephone or leave the house without his permission. But there are a few positive role models as well, such as the college student Alicia, who takes two trains and a bus to get to school, and Esperanza's Aunt Lupe, who encourages her to write poems. By the end of her narrative, Esperanza has discovered the therapeutic value of writing. She is confident that she will one day leave the neighborhood, but vows to return and help the women she has left behind, "the ones who cannot out."

MAJOR THEMES

Esperanza's Chicana identity is a central focus of *The House on Mango Street*. Though born and educated in the United States, Esperanza faces discrimination due to her ethnicity, her family's poverty, and her gender. From the beginning of her narrative, she is painfully aware of the relationship between social status and dwelling. In one respect the house on Mango Street represents security. "All brown all around, we are safe," Esperanza says. "But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another

color and our knees go shakity-shake." In another respect Esperanza's neighborhood and its run-down houses represent the elusiveness of the American Dream. Further, the limitations imposed upon women in the majority culture are exaggerated in the Latino community, where a machismo ethic prevails, restricting women to the roles of wife and mother and otherwise severely curtailing their freedoms. Esperanza realizes that if she stays in the neighborhood, where the men are demoralized by poverty and the women emotionally and physically abused, she will end up like her friends and neighbors. She rebels against the class and gender oppression she faces as a poor Chicana, both within and outside her community. Her sense of inhabiting two different worlds is represented by the image of the elm trees that grow outside her window amidst the concrete of the city streets: "Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here."

Language is another indicator of the gulf between the two worlds Esperanza occupies. Chicanos who do not speak English are relegated to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. In one vignette, Esperanza tells of a recent immigrant, "Geraldo No Last Name," who is killed in an automobile accident. Possessing no identification, he is remembered as "just another brazer who didn't speak English. Just another wetback." The episode also calls attention to the significance of naming, echoing an earlier vignette in which Esperanza records her desire to change her name so that she can avoid the fate of her unhappy great-grandmother: "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. ... I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees." Language is also equated with power, and Esperanza's writing is her source of freedom and self-expression.

As the narrative progresses, the house of Esperanza's dreams is not just a physical space but also a symbolic space of sanctuary: "Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. . . . Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem." Esperanza directly links the idea of a house—private and liberating—with the act of writing. Telling her own story is Esparanza's way of transcending the social condition that she has inherited. At the same time, however, she learns from her year of growing up that the past will always be a vital part of her identity: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. 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."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics immediately recognized *The House on Mango Street* as similar to but different from the existing Chicano canon, which in the early 1980s consisted of writings by a

handful of male authors. As Ramón Saldívar (1990) noted, "Contemporary Chicana writers challenge not only the ideologies of oppression of the Anglo-American culture that their Chicano brothers confront, but they also challenge the ideologies of patriarchal oppression evinced by Chicano writers and present within Chicano culture itself." The shift from a male-centered ideology focusing on class and race to a female subjectivity resistant to male domination has been emphasized in the criticism on The House on Mango Street as another way the book expanded the discussion of the minority experience in the United States. Much of this criticism stresses the hybrid form of the work, a blend of fiction and autobiography, prose and poetry, English and Spanish, and multiple subject perspectives that strains the conventional limits of the novel form, mirroring the border crossings central to Esperanza's reinvention. The question of genre, though, has mainly centered on the novel's qualities as a bildungsroman. Feminist readings, including those of Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo (1985), Delia Poey (1996), Alvina E. Quintana (1996), and Maria Karafilis (1998), examine how the novel subverts the white male values embedded in the traditional form. Karafilis observed that Esperanza's development progresses in terms of space rather than linear time and remarked on Cisneros's dismantling of the idea of the bourgeois home of the American Dream, another symbol of individualism.

More generally, critics have discussed the novel's themes of inclusion and exclusion with reference to Esperanza's dream of leaving the ghetto. Sonia Saldívar-Hull (2000) observed that Juan Rodriguez, the editor of the Chicano newsletter Carta Abierta and one of the first critics to review the novel, complained that Cisneros was assimilationist and that Esperanza rejects her Mexican heritage in favor of the bourgeois ideology of the American Dreamthe false promise of which was discussed by Saldívar-Hull. Many more critics have argued that what Esperanza wants to escape is the gender oppression of the Chicano community, not the women who live there. In the words of Anna Marie Sandoval (2008; see Further Reading), Esperanza "makes her experience the collective experience of Chicanas and other women who have not been given the privilege of writing their story." Scholars have considered Esperanza's quest for a private space to indulge her creativity, especially the vignette "A House of My Own," as a version of Virginia Woolf's feminist plea in A Room of One's Own, a 1929 essay in which Woolf related women's financial dependence to their limited opportunities for artistic development. As Tomoko Kuribayashi (1998; see Further Reading) remarked, "Cisneros' character, Esperanza, may have an even more flexible vision than Woolf's of what may be possible, when it comes to discerning borderlines and crossing (or stretching) them. Esperanza explores and then rejects the dichotomy of inside/outside, and posits new alternatives."

Janet Mullane

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Bad Boys. San Jose: Mango, 1980. (Poetry)

The House on Mango Street. Houston: Arte Público, 1983. (Novel)

My Wicked Wicked Ways. Bloomington: Third Woman, 1987. (Poetry)

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories. New York: Random House, 1991. (Short stories)

Hairs: Pelitos. New York: Knopf, 1994. (Children's fiction)

Loose Woman: Poems. New York: Knopf, 1994. (Poetry)

Caramelo o Puro cuento [Caramel; or Pure Invention]. New York: Knopf, 2002. (Novel)

Have You Seen Marie? New York: Knopf, 2012. (Prose)

CRITICISM

Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: González-Berry, Erlinda, and Tey Diana Rebolledo. "Growing Up Chicano: Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros." *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 13.3-4 (1985): 109-19. Print.

[In the following essay, González-Berry and Rebolledo consider similarities and differences between the "male" and "female" bildungsroman and between the traditional form of the genre and contemporary Chicano renderings, including Cisneros's House on Mango Street. Their analysis focuses on themes of self-exploration, myth, and oral tradition, as well as such formal properties as structure and narrative voice.]

We all grow up and our childhood is part of our history, our cultural baggage, and our definition of self. The recovery of the past through memories of childhood, the coming into knowledge of the person now by examination of the growing up period, and identification of social and cultural forces that shaped and influenced thier lives: these are some of the forces that lie behind the series of "growing up" poems and stories or *bildungsroman* written by Chicano writers.

The adventures of the hero/heroine that shape his/her destiny and bring self-knowledge and self-realization are part of the genre of self development through schooling or other forces of society, the *bildungsroman*, which could also be called *entwicklungsroman* or the novel of develop-

ment since, as Anais Pratt points out, "they delineate a turning point in the hero's life, that is of both personal, psychological import and social significance."

The growing up stories and poems written by Chicanos are part of a chain of searching for moments of insight into what made the Chicano what she/he is that forms a general theme in Chicano literature. Rolando Hinojosa, writing about Khail City, Tomás Rivera in ... v no se lo tragó la tierra, Rudolfo Anaya in Bless Me, Ultima, are tales of young boys growing into manhood or self-knowledge through the acceptance of the symbols, happenings, and circumstances of the past, and the subsequent integration/ unification of these as their destiny. For them the coming of age explains and signifies the winning of the kingdom of consciousness, heritage, and self. Characteristics of this male bildungsroman may include the following: 1) the hero leaves home or goes to school, 2) undergoes a trial by his peers, 3) is either accepted or learns to deal with his situations, 4) overcomes adversity, 5) in some way is successful at some heroic act, 6) discovers who he is, as a man and as a person in society, and, 7) at the end of the novel has integrated his consciousness, thus achieving self definition and is ready to deal with the world on his own terms.

Traditional growing up stories for females have quite a different scenario and outcome. The female adolescent may or may not go off to school, but in any case, in these stories the young woman also undergoes trials and tribulations which teach her how she must behave in society, what she must learn in order to assume her expected position. In contrast to the young male hero who at the end of the bildungsroman comes into a complete sense of integration and freedom, the female adolescent is carefully schooled to function in society, to lose her freedom and her sense of individuality in order to become a loving wife and mother. She thus integrates her destiny with that of a man who will protect her, defend her, and create a life for her. Whereas in their rites-of-passage, adolescent males encounter tests of strength and valour, Pratt points out that younger girls were given "tests in submission" while their older sisters were provided with models of behavior appropriate for success in the marriage market (14). Thus, rather than achieving maturity, young women of the traditional coming-of-age novels are led down the path to a second infancy. Consequently, the female bildungsroman has tended to culminate in images of imprisoned women. When escape is an option, it is most often found through death or insanity. While elements of this fare may have been typical of the writings of early Chicano writers, the contemporary female growing-up story focuses on a more general sense of loss, around the realization that innocence is gone, around awareness of death and mortality, of the inability to retreat back into childhood and, at times, of the necessity to conform to a life not necessarily chosen by them. Many of these stories find the woman in the child

and represent the voice of reflection. Seeing their own process of growing older, they monitor woman's going forth into the world. They also chronicle the world in which the adolescent heroine's expectations conflict with the dictates of the surrounding society. As Pratt further points out, "every element of her desired world-freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect and use of her erotic capabilities" clashes with the norms of a strongly family and male oriented society (20). These clashes are chronicled in rebellious thoughts or actions against the church, or in secreative sexual actions in the exploration of body and sexuality. Clearly, in the following two poems by Margarita Cota-Cardenas, the state of freedom, innocence and naturalness is reflected vis-a-vis the contained persons the lyric speaker and her sister have become.

Oohh the Boogyman

in Mesilla

New Mexico

in the summer

when I was very young

we would go to play

in the old cemetery

and I would chat very happily with my dead relatives

of a big cement

tomb

stepping on dancing, dancing a black painted skull

and I would dance on top

from delicious fright my cousins would laugh

and my little brother el

Plonquito

and my little sister la Billie

and among dust

mesquite dried flowers and tombs they'd be nervously shouting and shouting

and I'd be dancing and singing

singing and dancing

but last night

when the ghost of that poor soul buried in my former platform of cement

came looking for me

I had to deny myself voice trembling three times

¡No, I am not that daring young girl! ¡No I am not the happy Plonquita! No I am not the same!

"To a Little Blond Girl of Heber, Califas"

that little sister of mine was pretty, small tender but also very brave she wore cowboy boots a cowboy hat t-shirt and levis she was always followed by little Wienie dogs the Chapo the Chapa and the Chapitos once she tried to take a molar from one with a large pair of mechanic's pliers and during Holy Mass when communion was offered

to be precise she said to Father Jean Vincent -Cabrón. I am going to tell my papa that you didn't want to give me the white cookie. Now well she's a mother wife and she behaves herself.2

This paper will examine two Chicano novels which are part of the bildungsroman genre for their similarities to each other as well as their differences and for their relationship to the traditional bildungsroman.

Tomás Rivera's ... y no se lo tragó la tierra consists of twelve short narratives preceded by even shorter vignettes, all preceded by a prologue and followed by an epilogue. The twelve episodes represent the twelve months in a year and the symbolic time that passes in this novel/collection of stories. Of the twelve narratives, four are first person narrations (a young boy telling the story). The two middle narratives (the most significant ones in relation to the boy's sense of self vis-a-vis society and religion) are narrated by an observant third person—a device for lessening the intensity of the experience and one which strengthens the I/ he dichotomy to be discussed later. The remaining narrative voices are various stories from a collective history or memory. What ties the entire narrative structure together, as we discover in the epilogue, is the conscious thought process of a young man who, by the end of the narration, has become a man. The emphasis on the emergence of the adult is clearly illustrated when a child sees someone exit from under the house and cries, "Mami, mami, aquí está un viejo debajo de la casa. Mami, mami, mami, pronto, sal, aquí esta un viejo, aquí está un viejo" ("Mami, mami. There's a man under the house. Mami, mami, come outside quick. There's a man here, there's a man here").3 This allusion to an old man, when we in fact know it is a boy under the house, imbues this story with ambiguity. However, if we read the story on two levels the ambiguity is resolved. On the one hand, the story is that of a young boy seeking refuge, a place to reflect, remember, and order his life. On the other, this story acts as a metaphor for the process of writing, and the figure of the young protagonist (boy) and the narrator/author (man) merge when the child calls out, "There's a man here."

Why is he under the house? The first chapter consists of a rather ambiguous narration in which we are introduced to a character who seems to be suspended in limbo between reality and fantasy: "Casi siempre empezaba con un sueño donde despertaba de pronto y luego se daba cuenta de que realmente estaba dormido. Luego ya no supo si lo que pensaba había pasado o no" (1). This person hears a mysterious voice call, but each time he turns there is no one there. Finally he realizes that it is his own voice calling to him. Clearly this call beckons to an examination of the subconscious and/or metacultural.

At the beginning of the last story, a third person narrator introduces a young boy hiding under a house. While isolated under this house the boy has been reconstructing the memories of his past year. At this point the change from third person narrator to the boy's interior consciousness is indicated by italics and a graphically indicated box. Having entered the boy's interior world, we discover, via a stream of consciousness technique, a summary of all the stories of the book. In addition to bringing the reader in direct contact with the center of consciousness of the novel, this narration serves as a metaphor for Rivera's vision of the creative act. Inherent in that metaphor is the archetypal labyrinth motif which Rivera claims to be synonymous with the form and structure of literature.

The labyrinth was and is a man-made structure full of intricate passageways that make it difficult to find the way from the interior to the entrance or from the entrance to the center. In essence, the important element here is that the labyrinth provides a setting for a search . . . Literature represents man's life, it also reflects his inner search and his outward search. It is in a sense an intricate maze to provide either exteriorization or interiorization of the human involvement and evolvement.⁴

In the last story of ... y no se lo tragó la tierra, Rivera's literary theory and his creative work coincide perfectly. By situating the boy under the house, the author alludes to the center of the dark recesses of the labyrinth. The exterior of the labyrinth is suggested by a thin line of light which is visible to the boy, "De donde estaba nada más se veía una línea blanca de luz todo alrededor" (118). If the labyrinth is indeed a structure designed for search, and the light can be interpreted as understanding, then the boy must find his way out of the dark maze to reach the level of the light/knowledge. Now, then, we can return to the first story and understand that the voice is the voice of his alter ego calling him to enter the labyrinth in search of his "other." According to Rivera that search should lead to the discovery of the human condition,

for it is a vicarious notion of humanity, or man, to attempt to search for the other, "alter ego," in order to better comprehend himself. Again the labyrinth represents a structure into which his life can and does fit. In essence, is it not life in search of form—a conquest, a labyrinth in which to reflect his human condition?

(1971, 13)

Thus at the end of the story, not only has the nameless hero discovered who he is, but in the face of negative time, "he's losing his mind," he discovers "something" (127). Instead of "losing" himself, he knows that he has found himself and is in touch with that other part of himself, in the true meaning of uncover. This I/he dichotomy, reinforced in the form of the narration, is illustrative of the man-child separation, which through the process of the narration, through the thought process, find each other and are united for

always: "Luego cuando llegó a la casa se fue al árbol que estaba en el solar. Se subió. En el horizonte encontró una palma y se imaginó que ahí estaba alguien trepado viéndolo a él. Y hasta levantó el brazo y lo movió para atrás y para adelante para que viera que él sabía que estaba allí."

Rivera's book represents not only the coming of age of the protagonist and the coming to terms with the adult/child part of the narrator, but also the collective narrations of Chicano experiences, and the injustices that accompany them; they deal with the repression that religion brings, racism, suffering, laughing and crying—in sum all that makes up life, and in particular the life of the Chicanos known to the narrator. Whose stories are these? Are they all connected to the narrator? Sometimes it is a child narrator whose present adult consciousness sees through reality as if from behind a double veil, the adult experience with a child's perception of the events.

All the stories in ... y no se lo tragó la tierra are complete in themselves, that is, they stand by themselves; yet they are tied together by the common thread of the child/man narrator, under the house, in the labyrinth of memory collecting, synthesizing, creating.

In *The House on Mango St.* by Sandra Cisneros, the structure of the novel is similar to that of Tomás Rivera. First, the symbol of the house as consciousness, as collective memory, as archetypal labyrinth, as a nourishing structure within which (or in Rivera's case under which) the child comes into a sense of his/her own being is clearly presented in both texts. The outside community is also reflected in both texts. Cisneros' text is limited to Mango Street but, nevertheless, both childhood communities are the nucleus and the microcosm for the larger world.

Like Rivera's text, Cisneros' is a collection of smaller texts which can be read separately but which are related to each other through the narrative speaker as well as by characters who pop in and out of the stories. There are important differences between the two texts, however, just as there are similarities. One of the most important differences is in the narrative voice used by the female protagonist in The House on Mango St. While she narrates the lives, struggles and concerns of her immediate family, neighbors and friends on Mango Street, her voice is clearly and consistently that of a child—a child who reports life as it is: full of ambiguities, the possibility of misinterpretation, mysteries, fears and uncertainties. We see the world through this child's eyes and we also see the child as she comes to an understanding of herself, her world, and her culture.

The first vignette begins with a negation of her "house": it is not a real house, it is not a nice house, actually it is a disgrace. All six family members share rooms, there is

only one bath, it is in a poor neighborhood. But, more important, the house on Mango Street is not her house. "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, mama said. Temporary, said Papa. But I know how those things go."⁵

At the end of the story, however, the narrator comes to understand that despite her need for a space of her own, Mango Street *is* really a part of her—an essential, creative part she will never be able to leave. In this realization, Rivera and Cisneros coincide. While the protagonists of both narratives evolve in their journey or quest, beyond encapsulating cultural mores, both search in (as narrators) and return to (as authors) their neighborhoods for the human and historical materials of which their stories will be made.

A second difference is that in Rivera's text, the narrator is unnamed; perhaps this lack of naming is meant to indicate the universal condition. In Cisneros' text from the beginning the female protagonist knows who she is, and what her name is, Esperanza. Yet, even this name she would like to change.

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color ... It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong ... At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

(12-13)

Both texts are similar in the coming to terms with sexuality. For both young protagonists, the fear, mystery, and finally, understanding of sexuality—particularly the implications of their own, is important for the full realization of their being. However, the encounter with sexuality is experienced quite differently by each of these protagonists. Rivera's young boy emerges from his first encounter feeling that he has discovered something so marvelous as to compare it to the grace of God. This exposure to sex, in fact, frees him of culturally and religiously induced guilt and serves as a catalyst for further curiosity *vis-a-vis* the larger world: "Tenía ganas de saber más de todo" ("I had a strong desire to learn more about everything," 64). Espe-

ranza's first exposure to sex is an equally positive experience, one that points in the direction of acceptance. The story entitled "Hips" shows Esperanza and her young friends coming to terms with their bodies, as they feel themselves blooming like crocuses in the spring.

One day you wake up and there they are. Ready and waiting like a new Buick with the keys in the ignition. Ready to take you where? ... If you don't get them you may turn into a man. Nenny says this and she believes it. She is this way because of her age. But most important, hips are scientific, I say repeating what Alicia already told me. It's the bones that let you know which skeleton was a man's when it was a man and which a woman's.

They bloom like roses, I continue because it's obvious I'm the only one that can speak with any authority; I have science on my side. The bones just one day open. Just like that. One day you might decide to have kids, and then where are you going to put them? Got to have room. Bones got to give.

But don't have too many or your behind will spread. that's how it is, says Rachel whose mama is as wide as a boat. And we just laugh.

(47-8)

Their second exposure, however, functions as a warning of the nefarious implications surrounding female sexuality. Anxious to play grown up, the young girls put on high heeled shoes and parade down Mango Street only to confront male lasciviousness: "Bum man says, Yes, little girl. Your little lemon shoes are so beautiful. But come closer. I can't see very well. Come closer. Please" (39). Here we see echoes of "Little Red Riding Hood." However, the experience does function as an explicit warning, "We are tired of being beautiful. Lucy hides the lemon shoes and the red shoes and the shoes that used to be white under a powerful bushel basket on the backporch, until one Tuesday her mother who is very clean throws them away. But no one complains" (40).

That female biological coming-of-age is frequently established by physical violation is suggested in the story "Red Clowns": "Why did you leave me all alone? I waited my whole life. You're a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong. Only his dirty fingernails against my skin, only his sour smell again . . . He wouldn't let me go. He said I love, I love you Spanish girl" (94). An equally violent vision of sexual abuse of young women is alluded to in the following passage: "Until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You're not my daughter, you're not my daughter. And then he broke into using his hands" (85-6).

Despite these negative experiences, and the disillusion that accompany them, Esperanza dreams of physical love that is exciting, beautiful and fulfilling: "Everything is holding