Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity Study Guide

Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity by Sandra Cisneros

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Introduction

Sandra Cisneros's poem "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" is from her third book of poetry, *Loose Woman* (1994). The poem is a celebration of romantic love. The female speaker imagines how excited and delighted she would be if her lover were to return. She lets her mind and heart contemplate all the things she would do for him and how well she would treat him and relates how beautiful he is. She says she would dote on him and make sure she fully got to know him before he departed again, as she knows he would.

Cisneros is noted not only for her poems but also for her novels and short stories. She typically portrays strong, independent women of Mexican American heritage, who refuse to conform to traditional male expectations of how women should behave and what their place in society should be. "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" is not exactly a typical Cisneros piece, since it does not emphasize the Chicano or feminist aspect of her work. Instead, it is a heartfelt expression of the ideal of romantic love. It reveals the heightened perceptions and intensity of sensual and emotional responses that such love calls forth. It also expresses the realization that in such intense experiences of love, whether they last or not, lie the seeds of creativity and art.

Author Biography

Sandra Cisneros was born December 20, 1954, in Chicago, Illinois, the daughter of a Mexican father and Mexican American mother. She was the only daughter in a family of seven. Because her father missed his homeland, the family frequently moved from Chicago to Mexico City and then back again, leaving Cisneros often feeling homeless. She developed a love of reading and, as early as the fifth grade, had plans to go to college. During childhood and adolescence, she also began writing poems and stories.

In 1976, Cisneros earned a bachelor of arts degree from Loyola University of Chicago and then attended the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, graduating in 1978 with a master of fine arts degree. It was while studying in Iowa that Cisneros began writing about her experiences as a Latina woman living outside mainstream American culture.

Cisneros taught at the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago, and was a college recruiter and counselor for minority students at Loyola University, but her passion was for writing. In 1980, her first book of poems, *Bad Boys*, was published. In 1982, she received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. This endowment enabled her to continue working on *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which took her five years to complete. A collection of vignettes about the coming-of-age of a Latina woman in Chicago, *The House on Mango Street* won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. The novel was a popular success, selling more than two million copies over the next two decades.

Having made her mark on the national literary scene, Cisneros published a book of poetry, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), and a volume of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). In 1988 she was awarded a second fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Cisneros also taught as a visiting writer at various universities, including California State University, Chico (1987-1988); the University of California, Berkeley (1988); the University of California, Irvine (1990); and the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque (1991).

In 1994, Cisneros wrote a bilingual juvenile book, *Hairs: Pelitos*, illustrated by Terry Ybanez, and the same year published her third collection of poems, *Loose Woman*, which contains the poem "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity." Cisneros did not publish again until 2002, when her second novel, *Caramelo*, appeared. *Caramelo*, which took Cisneros nine years to write, is a multi-generational saga and historical novel about Latino immigration to the United States.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" begins with the speaker imagining the return of someone she obviously loves deeply. Addressing the absent lover directly, she imagines how she would act toward him if he returned. First, she would treat him like a valuable work of art, such as a piece by Matisse that had been considered lost. Henri Matisse was a French painter and sculptor who lived from 1869 to 1954. The speaker would also honor her returning lover by seating him on a couch like a pasha. A pasha was a Turkish title of rank or honor, placed after a person's name. The speaker then says she would dance a Sevillana, which is a dance from Seville, Spain that can be performed by a single female dancer. She would also leap around like a Taiwanese diva. Diva literally means goddess, and the term is often applied to female vocal stars in pop and opera. Taiwan has a number of young, female pop stars who are often called divas. They are known for their energetic and athletic performances on stage.

Next, the speaker says she would bang cymbals like in a Chinese opera. Chinese opera makes frequent use of percussion instruments. The persona of the poem would also "roar like a Fellini soundtrack." Federico Fellini (1920-1993) was an Italian film director, famous for innovative films such as *La strada*, *La dolce vita*, and *Otto e mezzo (8-1/2)*. Nino Rota wrote the music for Fellini's films, which contribute greatly to their impact. The two men had a long collaboration, which ended only with Rota's death in 1979. The poem's speaker says she would also laugh like the little dog in the nursery rhyme that watched the cow jump over the moon.

Stanza 2

The speaker continues to address her absent lover. If he were to return, she would be a clown and tell funny stories. She would paint clouds on the walls of her home - an image that presumably expresses her desire to show artistic creativity. She would put the best linen on the bed for him and observe him while he sleeps. During this time, she would hold her breath, which is a way of saying that she would be very quiet so as not to awaken him.

Stanza 3

The speaker breaks off from addressing her loved one directly and, using a series of similes, muses on the beauty of her beloved. Her beloved is like the "color inside an ear" or "like a conch shell." A conch shell is a spiral, one-piece shell of certain sea mollusks or any large shell used as a horn for calling. The third simile used to convey the beauty of her beloved is a nude by Modigliani. Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) was a French painter known for his distinctive portraits and nudes.

Stanza 4

In this stanza, the speaker returns to addressing her beloved. She declares that this time she will cut off some of his hair, so that even if he leaves her again, some part of him will remain. This image sparks a memory for the speaker of how soft her lover's hair is, the softest that can be imagined.

Stanza 5

The speaker continues with another set of actions she would perform if the beloved returned. She would present him with flowers and fruit, including parrot tulips and papaya. Parrot tulips have petals that are feathered, curled, twisted, or waved. The flowers are large and brightly colored. The papaya is a tropical tree that produces large yellow-orange fruit, like a melon.

The speaker then says she would laugh at the stories her returning lover told, though she could equally well be silent in his presence. She knows her lover is aware such an act of silence in his presence is normally hard for her.

Stanza 6

The speaker seems to have no illusions about her lover. She knows when he grows tired of her or the place they live, he will leave. He could go anywhere, and she names places far away and near: Patagonia, a region in Argentina and Chile; Cairo, Egypt; Istanbul, Turkey; Katmandu, the capital city of Nepal; and finally Laredo, Texas, a town on the United States-Mexico border with a large Mexican American population.

Projecting into the future, the speaker imagines what she will gain by her lover's return, even if he later departs again. She will have savored him like a tasty food, memorized everything about him, and tasted his essence ("held you under my tongue"). She will have learned him by heart. Here the poet plays on the usual meaning of the expression "learn by heart," which means to learn by memorizing. Since the poet has already mentioned memorizing, this phrase placed here means that the speaker learned all about her lover through her heart, through love.

The speaker's conclusion is that when her loved one leaves, all her knowledge and love of him will yield their fruit in the poetry she will write. He will become her muse.

Summary

"Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" is a poem about a woman's love for an absent lover on whom she would dote and delight if he were to return and stay, though she fears he will not do so.

As the poem begins, the narrator addresses her absent lover and tells him all the wonderful, creative things she would do if he were to return to her. She says she would treasure him as if he were a lost Matisse painting; she would dance and sing like a Taiwanese diva, and she would even laugh like the little dog that watches the cow jump over the moon.

The woman's creativity would increase if her lover would return, and she would tell stories like a clown and paint clouds on the walls of her home. In addition to the whimsy, the home would be prepared with care, especially the bed upon which only the finest linens would be placed. The woman would watch her beloved as he sleeps and stay quiet so as not to disturb him.

The speaker then switches the perspective from directly addressing her lover to general observations about his beauty. The woman compares the man's color to that of the inside of an ear, like the inside of a conch shell, or a Modigliani nude. The thought occurs to the woman that she will cut off a piece of her lover's hair so that she will always have a part of him no matter where he is.

The woman again addresses the missing lover directly and talks of how she will indulge him with parrot tulips and laugh at his stories or just stay quiet if that is what he wants, although she knows that he will always leave again for some exotic location.

Ultimately, the narrator acknowledges that her lover will always want to leave but if he comes back, then she will take the steps to savor and memorize him so that she will have the content necessary to write more poetry.

Analysis

The woman addresses her absent lover, prizing him dearly and comparing him to some of the icons of the cultural and artistic worlds, such as a Matisse painting, a Sevillana dancer, or a Turkish Pasha. Her affections run the gamut from the notoriously erotic Fellini productions to the childlike humor of the little dog watching the cow jump over the moon in the famous nursery rhyme.

The unrequited love prompts the woman to offer up her creativity by telling funny stories, painting clouds on the walls of her home, and covering the bed in the finest linens so that her beloved may sleep undisturbed while she watches quietly. The woman is willing to give everything she has for this man, even though he moves sporadically in and out of her life. The woman offers up everything bright and beautiful, and she offers

to restrain herself and not say anything despite her love of talking, if that is what the man would want. This attitude is stereotypical of many women who grew up before the age of women's liberation, especially those of Hispanic heritage like the author.

As the woman muses about her lover, she remembers how beautiful he is, using similes "like the color inside an ear" and "like a conch shell" which capture for the reader exactly what the author means with a spare, but elegant, description.

The only inference of trying to restrain the man or trick him into staying is with the mention of cutting a lock of the man's hair which could have references to the Biblical story of Samson who loses his strength and is unable to go out into the world once his hair has been cut.

At the end of the poem, the woman loses some of her energy for the unrequited love and declares that every visit from her lover leaves her with more memories from which she will continue to draw and find her creative energy to write more poetry.

The significance of the poem's title, "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity," is in reference to Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity which states that two people who move relative to each other will experience the same situation and passage of time in completely different ways even though the physical properties and time measurement are the same for both. The woman dotes on the man when he is available and agonizes over his absence, while he obviously does not return the same level of feelings or the same anguish; therefore, the love is merely relative to the observer.

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Themes

Romantic Love

The title of the poem, "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" is meant humorously. It refers to Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity, published in 1905, and his general theory of relativity, developed in 1915 and 1916. Using calculations based on the postulate of the uniform speed of light and the relativity of motion (the motion of something can be determined only by its relation to something else), Einstein showed that time is measured differently for people moving relative to one another. At speeds of light, time would slow to near zero.

In the popular mind, Einstein's theory, which is too complex for most laymen to understand in detail, has given rise to the idea that under certain circumstances, time might flow backward rather than forward. The actual physics of this notion is not important for the poem. Cisneros merely uses the idea as a jumping-off point for her speaker to imagine that, since time might run backwards, her lost lover might return.

Using this premise, the poem explores the many ways in which love can be expressed, and the lover can appreciate the beloved. There is an emphasis on the freedom love brings, as well as the feelings of exultation and lightness, of exhilaration, and of the intensity of sensual experience. This kind of love animates a person and enlivens her physically. Love is exciting. It makes the persona of the poem dance and leap with enthusiasm and do things she would not normally do. Love energizes.

The love revealed by the poem is also a grand sentiment, an expansive emotion. It stimulates in the lover the flamboyant expression of her feelings, and it can also enlarge her beyond her normal self and beyond her usual cultural boundaries. She can be a Spanish dancer or a Taiwanese diva, or she can take part in a Chinese opera. Her voice can be like the roar of music on a film soundtrack. When she loves, she leaves her small, individual self behind. She becomes universal.

Certain kinds of love, such as intensely felt romantic love, tend to worship and idealize the beloved. Such is the case in this poem. The persona idealizes the beauty of her lover ("How beautiful you are"). She is so enchanted by him that she would be content simply to watch him sleep. She wants to cut off a lock of his hair so that part of her beloved will always remain with her. She would do whatever he wanted. Her own needs would somehow slip into the background as she spent all her energy attending to him, honoring him, being the woman that she thinks he wants her to be. She would not be angry when, tired of her attention, he left again. She honors his restless spirit and would accept his loss without rancor. At least she would have her memories.

At the same time, there is a suggestion of unreality about the way the persona speaks of her love. It may strike some readers as a flight of the imagination that is too exaggerated, too extreme, and too fragile to survive the test of real experience. Such a

view might note that behind the unabashed expression of devotion and love, this poem has an untold story□that these two people had a romantic relationship before, which did not, for unknown reasons, endure and would not (as the speaker recounts) endure again, even if the lover were to return.

Love as the Origin of Art

The last two lines of the poem suggest that love is the fuel of art and creativity. The memory of a love so deeply felt, absorbed into the fibers of the lover's being, even if the desired relationship does not last, will inspire her to write poetry. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that it is the loss of love that will inspire her. It is, after all, the loss of her love and her hopes for his return that has inspired the entire poem. So, underlying the tribute to love is perhaps a sadder reality. Love may not endure in the flesh, but it can be transformed into art.

Style

Visual Design

The poem is written with an awareness of how it appears on the printed page, in particular in relation to the line breaks. For example, the first line contains only one word, "If." The rest of the phrase, "you came back," follows on line 2. There is no grammatical reason for splitting up the phrase in this manner. The same device is used to begin the fifth stanza. The effect is to place much greater emphasis on that one word "if" then would otherwise be the case and makes it clear that the desire of the speaker is to be taken more as fantasy than realistic hope. The arrangement of the line is also a cue for the reader, when reading the poem aloud, as to where to place emphasis and pauses.

The design of the printed page is also important in stanzas 4 and 6. In stanza 4, in which the persona imagines cutting a lock of her beloved's hair so that he will never leave her, the lines become progressively shorter.

The visual design suggests something other than what the lines actually say: they depict the reality that the lover seeks to avert. Her beloved is going to depart, whatever she does, so the line shortens with each statement, as if he is slipping from her grasp in spite of all her efforts.

A similar effect is apparent in stanza 6, which deals directly with the beloved's inevitable departure:

off you'd go to Patagonia
Cairo Istanbul
Katmandu
Laredo

Each line gets shorter, as if the speaker's hold on her lover is diminishing with each place she names. He is fading into the distance.

Punctuation

The poem is written with almost no punctuation. There are no periods to mark the ends of sentences, the ends of stanzas, or even the end of the poem. There are clues, however, about where periods might fall, had they been used: when a sentence "ends," the following line begins with a capital letter.

It is difficult to know the poet's intent for her lack of punctuation. Perhaps it makes the poem more spontaneous, as if it is an unrestrained outpouring of idealized love and emotion that cannot even pause for a comma or a period. In the few instances when

punctuation is used, as in "Ah, the softest hair / Ah, the softest," the effect is to slow down the reader and provide a moment of quiet contemplation.

Simile

This relatively short poem contains no less than ten similes. A simile is a figure of speech in which two things that appear dissimilar are compared in such a way that some similarity between them is exposed. A single voice can hardly "roar like a Fellini soundtrack," for example, but the comparison gives a sense of how the persona's delight at her returning lover can transform her, make her bigger than her everyday self.

A series of three striking similes compares the beauty of the beloved to various physical phenomena and to the creations of art. Another interesting simile is the comparison of the persona to a sunflower as she watches her sleeping beloved. A sunflower turns its face to the light, following the movement of the sun across the sky. So too the speaker watches and follows with her eyes the movement of her lover as he sleeps. The syntax of the two lines "I'd hold my breath and watch / you move like a sunflower" suggests that the comparison of the sunflower is with the beloved, not the lover, but it makes little sense for the random movements of a sleeping man to be compared to a sunflower. The simile seems far more appropriate if it is taken to refer to the lover following her "sun," the beloved.

Historical Context

Chicano (Mexican American) literature began to establish itself in the United States in the 1960s. This period, sometimes known as the Chicano Renaissance, was in part inspired by the Civil Rights movement. Chicano writers emphasized the need for political action to provide equal opportunities for Chicanos. One of the leading figures in this movement was Tomás Rivera (1935-1984), whose novel *y no se lo trago la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971) told of the hardships endured by Mexican American migrant workers. In 1972, Rudolfo Anaya (1937-) published *Bless Me, Ultima*, which has become one of the most popular of all Mexican American novels.

In the 1980s, mainstream publishers became more willing to publish works by Chicano and other Latino writers (such as Cuban Americans or Puerto Ricans), in part because of the movement in colleges and universities known as multiculturalism, in which efforts were made to reshape the literary canon to better reflect cultural diversity in America. Minority authors were thus given a better chance of being published and acquiring a large readership. It was during the 1980s that Chicano poet Gary Soto (1952-) made his mark nationally, and a number of Mexican American women writers found their literary voices, including Lorna Dee Cervantes (1954-), Gloria Anzaldua (1942-), Denise Chavez (1948-), and Sandra Cisneros. These women writers successfully articulated the desires and experiences of Mexican American women. They challenged the values of the patriarchal societies in which they were raised, while at the same time affirming their distinctive Mexican American heritage.

It was in the 1990s that Latino literature made its biggest breakthroughs into mainstream literary publishing and readership. In 1990 Oscar Hijuelos (1951-) became the first Latino to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, for his novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, which follows two Cuban immigrants who come to New York. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1992) by Julia Alvarez (1950-) traces the lives of four sisters who immigrated to Miami from the Dominican Republic. The novel found a wide readership and won critical acclaim.

In an interview published in 1993 in *Booklist*, however, Cisneros argues that there is still a long way to go before Latino writers can gain the recognition and readership they deserve. She says she feels a responsibility to promote the work of the large number of as-yet-unknown Latino writers. She looks forward to a time when Latinos will be in influential positions in publishing and journalism and will be able to make decisions about which books get published and reviewed. She states,

> There should be working-class writers, people of color, making the decisions that affect us all, whether it's determining funding in the arts or deciding what should be published or what is considered quality literature.

Although during the 1990s there were many anthologies of Latino writing published, Cisneros was wary of allowing her work to be included in anthologies with the word

"Hispanic" in the title. Her reasoning was because such titles tended to marginalize the works as "ethnic literature" rather than taking them into the mainstream.

Critical Overview

Cisneros has attracted more attention for her novel *The House on Mango Street* and her short-story collection *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) than for her poetry, which has been largely ignored by academic critics. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes similarities between the poems in *Loose Woman* and Cisneros's coming-of-age novel *The House on Mango Street*: "We meet again a powerful, fiercely independent woman of Mexican heritage." The reviewer concludes, however, the poems cannot match the "depth, the complexity and the lyrical magic" of Cisneros's novels and short stories.

Susan Smith Nash in *World Literature Today* comments on the "sometimes rather flat, unadorned diction and the earthy explorations into the nature of desire" that characterize the poems in *Loose Woman*. Nash describes the "heightened awareness of the textures, colors, and physical sensations of the world" revealed by the poems. Because all the poems in *Loose Woman* express different aspects of the female experience and challenge conventional notions of identity, Nash also notes, "the reader gains the opportunity to celebrate the diversity of human experience."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses Cisneros's poem in the context of other poems in her collection Loose Woman.

In her poetry, Cisneros likes to speak directly from the heart, to the heart. Her poems are not complex; the diction is straightforward and the meanings of the poems usually reveal themselves on the first reading. There is rarely a need to tease out allusions or hidden themes; the punch is delivered quickly and with force. Anyone who has ever been in love, for example, will instantly recognize the symptoms described in "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity": the self in a state of wild abandon; the beloved contemplated as if he or she were a god; the intense feelings that create a kind of sacred space between two people, upon which the mundane aspects of life cannot intrude. The poem conveys a spontaneity and charm, almost a youthful naïveté, that suggests real experience. It gives the impression of having been written quickly, in the flush of that one overpowering and exhilarating emotion, whether felt at the time or vividly recalled later. And yet, the poem may not be quite what it first appears.

Cisneros sheds light on her method of composition, as well as making some revealing remarks about her poems, in an interview with Martha Satz published in *Southwest Review*. Cisneros says she wrote many of the poems published in *Loose Woman* for her private satisfaction only, never intending them to be published. She believes that her public life as a writer centers around her novels. As a poet, she feels free to explore the most intimate aspects of her psyche without a thought of how the results will be received by others: "The reason I write it is not to publish it but to get the thorn out of the soul of my heart." Cisneros takes inspiration from Emily Dickinson, another poet who did not write for publication. Cisneros notes, "[Dickinson] knew that the true reason one writes poetry and works at the craft is simply to write that poem."

Cisneros also comments in the same interview that in her poetry she does not decide what to write beforehand; the words just spill out, and she does not even feel in conscious control of the process. She writes what the inner levels of her psyche prompt her to write. Most readers would probably agree that many of the sixty poems in *Loose Woman* do indeed give this impression. These are not poems that have been much revised and reworked or agonized over. They are like quick snapshots of certain moods, attitudes, emotions, and situations. Taken together, they present a many-sided portrait of the experience of being a woman involved in the affairs of the heart.

"Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" presents one of the more innocent aspects of that many-sided portrait. The reader would hardly guess from that poem the persona Cisneros adopts in many of the other poems. "With *Loose Woman*," Cisneros tells Satz, "I entered a realm where I am writing from a dangerous fountainhead." By this, she means the sexual aspects of her poems, which she thought that men might find threatening: "I strike terror among the men. / I can't be bothered what they think," she writes in "Loose Woman."

The title of the collection is meant, at least in one sense, ironically. "Loose woman" is how the persona of the poems thinks she might be described from a male, conservative, traditional standpoint; it is how a certain type of man might view her. From her point of view, "loose woman," as the poem of that title makes clear, is a label she bears with pride because for her it means being free from repressive, restricted ideas about how a woman should think and behave.

It is as well to remember that Cisneros was raised in a Mexican American community, in which patriarchal attitudes were the norm. These attitudes included the belief that a woman's place was in the home, sex was mainly for the pleasure of the male, and it was right for men to have freedom, privileges, and power that were denied to women. Cisneros once quipped that not only was she the only daughter in her family - she has six brothers - she was also "only a daughter." (She also takes care to note that her mother raised her in a nontraditional way, always allowing her time to study and fighting for her right to have a college education.) Given this traditional patriarchal context, the persona that Cisneros adopts in *Loose Woman* - of an independent woman who can be defiant, passionate, angry, raunchy, and ribald and is ready to indulge in sexual pleasure herself - is a threat to the accepted way of things. As the persona states in "Night Madness Poem," "I'm the crazy lady they warned you about."

In many of these poems, Cisneros clearly alludes to her Mexican heritage. "You Bring out the Mexican in Me" is typical, with its liberal spattering of Spanish words - a common device in these poems, though absent from "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" - and its allusions to Mexico's pre-Christian pagan history. By invoking some of the potent symbols of Mexico's indigenous religions, such as the "filth goddess" Tlazoltéotl, she conveys a kind of on-the-edge, primordial wildness, a sultry, essentially female life-force springing up from ancient streams and ready to disconcert any man who does not understand it or who tries to stand in its way. This is the authentic Cisneros, feminist-woman-of-color persona, and it is the dominant voice in the collection. Here, for example, is the persona's opinion of marriage and husbands, from the poem "Extreme Unction":

Husband.
Balm for the occasional
itch. But I'm witch now.
Wife makes me wince.

There is another voice in *Loose Woman*, one that does not insist so much on challenging cultural taboos. This is a more romantic, feminine voice, tinged often with longing and regret and a certain vulnerability. It occurs only occasionally, but it can be heard, for example, in "Waiting for a Lover," in which the persona nervously awaits the arrival of her new date, wondering what will happen: "You're new. / You can't hurt me yet." As she gets ready she continues:

I can't think.
Dress myself in slinky black,
my 14-karat hoops and my velvet spikes.

Smoke two cigars.
I'm doing loopity loops.

There is nothing feminist or Chicana about these statements; they could be any woman ready to embark on a new courtship (although perhaps the smoking of two cigars marks this lady as a little out of the ordinary!).

A similar voice is heard in "Why I Didn't," in which the persona pulls back from a sexual involvement with her friend:

Oh I'm scared all right
Haven't you noticed. I'm
only shy when I like a man.

When this feminine voice allows full reign to her feelings, the result is "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity," in which all diffidence and fear is overcome in the exuberant celebration of love. This persona is pliant rather than self-assertive and romantic rather than overtly sexual although fully aware of the sacredness of the body and the gifts it can bestow. Intoxicated by this pure, idealistic love for a man, she is ready to indulge his every whim and accept without reproach his inevitable wandering. She elevates herself to the level of infinite love that sees no fault. Yet, it should also be noted that this is a poem addressed to an absent lover, and, as the saying goes, absence makes the heart grow fonder. The poem is not a celebration of a here-and-now love relationship but of some imagined reunion at some time in the future. Despite its future orientation, it is more of a hymn to something past, something that has gone, and can now be safely enshrined and worshipped.

This seems to be a recurring theme in the poems of *Loose Woman*. They are rarely celebrations of here-and-now love but of love recalled or anticipated. The same idealization of an absent lover can be found in the first section of "Los Denudos: A Triptych," in which the speaker imagines a painting by Goya in which the female nude is replaced by her former lover. The flesh-and-blood man is turned into a work of art for the doting persona to contemplate.

Similarly, the theme in "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity," that the memory of love inspires the writing of poetry, also occurs elsewhere in *Loose Woman*, notably in "My Nemesis Arrives after a Long Hiatus." This poem, which in fact is more about departure than arrival, contains the lines, "In the clatter of your departures / I write poems." To which we can compare, "So that when you leave / I'll write poems," which are the final two lines of "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity."

It seems that for the persona of Cisneros's poems love may be a many-splendored thing, but it is perhaps better contemplated in retrospect, and not the least of its many fruits is the production of art.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Thomas examines the essential qualities of Cisneros's writing.
For Sandra Cisneros, "our familia is our culture." Her stories and poems explore ethnicity, gender, language, and place where intimate and communal women-centered space provides ways of knowing the world of meaning and identity. Women's relationships, magic, myth, religion, and politics figure prominently in Cisneros' work, providing a rich matrix for her attempt to balance love and artistic work. In contrast to traditional representations of women, Cisneros foregrounds women characters who are often engaged to escape from the confinements of patriarchal determined roles common to two cultures, to interpret their own experience and redefine their lives. Her characters and situations are diverse and complex, reflecting realities that transcend stereotypes and categories. Once she found her own voice, Cisneros says, "I could speak up and celebrate my otherness as a woman, as a working-class person, as an American of Mexican descent" (*Mango*).

Cisneros' narrative style rejects traditional short story forms in favor of collage, often a mosaic of interrelated pieces, blending the sounds of poetry with oral story telling techniques. Her ingenious use of language includes the rhythm, sound, and syntax of Spanish, its sensibilities, emotional relationships to the natural world and inanimate objects, and its use of tender diminutives. She also uses the poetry of urban street slang, children's rhymes, and song creating her own innovative literary style at once musical, spontaneous, primal, and direct.

In her introduction to the 1994 edition of *Mango Street* she notes:

> The language of *Mango Street* is based on speech. It's very much an anti-academic voice□a child's voice, a girl's voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican. It's in this rebellious realm of antipoetics that I tried to create a poetic text with the most unofficial language I could find. I did it neither ingenuously nor naturally. It was as clear to me as if I were tossing a Molotov.

In the series of 44 brief, poetically charged vignettes which compose *Mango Street*, the voice of Esperanza Codero observes and documents the lives around her, women who look out the window and "sit their sadness on an elbow" ("My Name"). In this coming of age story, Esperanza writes about women who are alienated, confined, restricted, trapped by poverty, and often deserted by lovers and husbands. There is Rose Vargas, with too many kids and a husband who "left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come" ("There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do"), and Esperanza's own mother, "a smart cookie" who says, "I couldn've been somebody, you know?" She speaks two languages and can sing an opera but can't get down on the subway ("A Smart Cookie"). Esperanza's environment is characterized by both poverty and racism as well as the warmth,

intimacy, and humor of her culture. She is nurtured and empowered by women who share stories and poems with her, who encourage her to keep writing because it will keep her free, who remind her never to forget who she is, that she "will always be Mango Street." As Esperanza's voice gains strength, she provides a powerful, carnal, poetic, and "unofficial text" which critiques traditional western discourse. Unlike the women around her, Esperanza escapes confinement and isolation, refusing to accept socioeconomic and gender-determined limitations. Instead, she discovers her inner poetic self and moves away from feelings of shame, away from silence towards artistic freedom and a fullness of identity. In the last story she says, "One day I will pack my bags of books and paper." But she leaves to return "for the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out" ("Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes").

In *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, published in 1987, the voice of the youthful Esperanza merges with that of the grown woman/poet. "Tell me," she asks, "how does a woman who / a woman like me. / Daughter of / a daddy with no birthright in the matter. / What does a woman inherit / that tells her how / to go?" Her first felony she tells us is to have taken up with poetry, chucking the "life of the rolling pin or factory" (Preface). She says, "I've learned two things. / To let go / clean as kite string. / And never to wash a man's clothes. / These are my rules." ("For a Southern Man"). Her feminist Mexican American voice is playful, street smart, vigorous, and original continuing to transgress the dominant discourse of canonical standards, linguistically and ideologically.

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, published in 1991, in contrast to those living on Mango Street, women struggle to take control of their lives in a place where love sours, men leave, and becoming a female artist is an arduous struggle. Against a background of *telenovelas*, religion, magic, and art, women find ways to escape and transform their lives. Clemencia, an artist rejected by her white married lover, paints and repaints his portrait, engaging in an imaginary conversation: "You think I went hobbling along with my life, whining like some twangy country-and-western when you went back for her. But I've been waiting. Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is?" ("Never Marry a Mexican"). In "The Eyes of Zapata," the general's long time lover patiently waits for him, turning herself "into the soul of a *tecolote*" (owl), keeping "vigil in the branches of a purple jacaranda outside your door to make sure no one would do my Miliano harm while he slept." Invoking magic, offering a prayer in "*mexicano* to the old gods," and a plea to La Virgen, Ines endures. In the final story, Cisneros contrasts a highly educated Chicana artist with a young man whose poetic sensibilities challenge her values and perspectives. Lupe asks Flavio to make love to her in "*That* language. That sweep of palm leaves and fringed shawls. That startled fluttering like the heart of a goldfinch or a fan," not in English "with its starched r's and g's. English with its crisp linen syllables. English crunchy as apples, resilient and stiff as sailcloth. But Spanish whirred like silk, rolled and puckered and hissed" ("*Bien* Pretty").

In *Loose Woman*, her most recent book of poetry, Cisneros' lyricism is characterized by sassy deftness and precision of language. She's a woman who talks back. Addressing her lover she says: "You bring out the Mexican in me. / The hunkered thick dark spiral. / The core of a hear howl. / The bitter bile. / The tequila *lagrimas* on Saturday all / through next weekend Sunday." In the title poem Cisneros warns she is a woman-on-the-loose,

both b□□ and beast: "I'm an aim-well / shoot-sharp / sharp-tongued /sharp-thinking, / fast-speaking, / foot-loose, / loose-tongued, / let-lose, / woman-onthe- loose, / loose woman. / Beware, honey." In these poems Cisneros is concerned with women's erotic power, the joy of the female "Sinew / and twist of flesh, / helix of desire and vanity" ("Well, If You Insist"). She deftly explores and celebrates the wonder, possibilities, and consequences of being Mexican American and a woman□tough, independent, free-spirited, revolutionary and loose.

"I have always believed that, when a man writes a record of a series of events, he should begin by giving certain information about himself: his age, where he was born, whether he be short or tall or fat or thin," Ann Petry wrote in her 1947 novel, *Country Place*. "This information offers a clue as to how much of what a man writes is to be accepted as truth, and how much should be discarded as being the result of personable bias. For fat men do not write the same kind of books that thin men write; the point of view of tall men is unlike that of short men." In each of her works Cisneros throws the literary equivalent of a Molotov cocktail into Western discourse aimed at revolutionizing its monocultural representational system. Within her Chicana feminist alternative discourse, she privileges the wondrous and particular lives of those often defined as other, the *different*, those perceived as marginalized, as less than. She then illuminates these untold lives. When asked if she is Esperanza, she replies, "Yes, and no. And then again, perhaps maybe. One thing I know for certain, you, the reader, are Esperanza." And she asks a reader, will you learn to be "the human being you are not ashamed of?" Sandra Cisneros' work is not only original, unrelenting, and eloquent, it is essential.

Source: Carol Thomas, "Cisneros, Sandra," in *Contemporary Women Poets*, edited by Pamela L. Shelton, St. James Press, 1998, pp. 63-64.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Tompkins discusses Cisneros's life and writings.

Sandra Cisneros, poet and short-story writer, is best known for *The House on Mango Street* (1983), a Chicana novel of initiation, which won the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985. In this lyrical novella Cisneros challenges the conventions of the bildungsroman by weaving the protagonist's quest for selfhood into the fabric of the community. Such a dual focus is usual in Cisneros's poetry and prose, in which a multiplicity of voices illustrate the ways the individual engages in the discourses and social practices of Chicano culture. Additionally, by focusing on the socialization processes of the female in Chicano culture, Cisneros explores racism in the dominant culture as well as patriarchal oppression in the Latino community.

Born to working-class parents (her father an upholsterer, her mother a factory worker), Cisneros grew up as the only girl among six brothers on Chicago's South Side. Out of necessity, she learned to make herself heard, recalling in an 11 January 1993 interview, "You had to be fast and you had to be funny□you had to be a *storyteller*." Since her Mexican father missed his homeland and would frequently sojourn there for periods of time, the family was often disrupted and moved from one ghetto neighborhood to another many times during her childhood. In 1969 her parents managed to buy a cramped two-story bungalow in a Puerto Rican neighborhood on the city's North Side, an ugly red house similar to the one Cisneros portrays in *The House on Mango Street*.

Responding to questions concerning the autobiographical nature of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros in the spring 1991 *Americas Review* observed, "All fiction is non-fiction. Every piece of fiction is based on something that really happened. . . . They're all stories I lived, or witnessed, or heard." Nevertheless, the central idea of her novel had a specific literary inspiration. In a seminar at the Iowa Writers Program, Cisneros participated in a discussion of Gaston Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'éspace* (1958; translated as *The Poetics of Space*, 1964) and realized that her unique experience of the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, and gender separated her from the other students.

The House on Mango Street tells the story of a child named Esperanza (Hope) and her gradual realization of her own separate being. The tale of maturation is supported by Cisneros's use of the house as a symbol of familial consciousness, and the novel also depicts the lives, struggles, and concerns of Esperanza's immediate family, neighbors, and friends. As Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo point out, "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."

In a manner somewhat comparable to that of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Cisneros's work mixes genres, for while each section achieves, in Ellen McCracken's words, "the intensity of the short story," the forty-four interrelated stories allow for a development of character and plot typical of the

novel. Julián Olivares quotes Cisneros on her intent: "I wanted to write stories that were a cross between poetry and fiction. . . . Except I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or that could be read in a series to tell one big story. I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation."

The image of the house, as McCracken points out, is symbolic in three distinctive ways, first as it suggests a positive objectification of the self for Esperanza. Before her family moved into the house on Mango Street, Esperanza's teachers had made denigrating remarks about their living conditions. "'You live *there?*' . . . I had to look where she pointed□the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. . . . The way she said it made me feel like nothing." Sister Superior reveals her prejudices by suggesting that as a Mexican, Esperanza must live in "a row of ugly 3-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into." Thus, though far from perfect, the family's new home, according to McCracken, "represents a positive objectification of the self, the chance to redress humiliation and establish a dignified sense of her own personhood."

Cisneros also successfully dramatizes both the individual and the communal significance of owning a house. Such a basic human desire and need is especially crucial for economically oppressed minorities. The house Esperanza dreams of beyond her family home will still have a communal function. She vows that "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." In a third distinctive motif Cisneros establishes a link between the image of the house and creativity, not only in the bedtime stories Esperanza's mother tells, but also in the daughter's wish for "a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem."

Despite the generally positive symbolism of the house, Cisneros does explore issues of patriarchal and sexual violence. During the course of the novel, a woman is locked in by her husband, a young girl is brutally beaten by her father, and Esperanza is raped. But even as she "mourns her loss of innocence" Esperanza understands, as critic María Herrera-Sobek points out, that by romanticizing sexual relations, grown-up women are complicit in the male oppression of their sex.

Several positive role models, McCracken observes, help guide Esperanza's development. Minerva, barely two years older than Esperanza, writes poetry when not dealing with her two children and an abusive husband. In fact, Esperanza realizes that Minerva's writing allows her to transcend her predicament. Also, Esperanza's bedridden aunt encourages her, "You must keep writing. It will keep you free." And "las comadres" (godmothers or women close to the family circle) tell Esperanza that her art must be linked to the community: "When you leave you must remember always to come back . . . for the others. A circle, you understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. . . . You can't forget who you are." Writing, then, empowers Esperanza and strengthens her commitment to the community of Chicanas.

The House on Mango Street, in Ramón Saldívar's view, "represents from the simplicity of childhood vision the enormously complex process of the construction of [a woman's ethnic identity]. Posing the question of sexual difference within the urban working-class Chicano community, Cisneros's novel emphasizes the crucial roles of racial and material as well as ideological conditions of oppression." The need to address such pervasive conditions became clear to Chicana writers of the 1980s. After *The House on Mango Street* many Chicanas developed, according to Yvonne Yarbo- Bejarano, "a clear-sighted recognition of the unavoidably mutual overdetermination of the categories of race and class with that of gender in any attempted positioning of the Chicana subject."

Cisneros's willingness to experiment in different genres leads to stylistic and thematic crossovers. However, Cisneros regards writing poetry and prose as distinctly different: "writing poetry . . . you're looking at yourself *desnuda*. . . . [Y]ou've got to go beyond censorship . . . to get at that core of truth. . . . When you think: 'Oh my goodness, I didn't know I felt that!' that's when you stop. . . . That's a poem. It's quite a different process from writing fiction, because you know what you are going to say when you write fiction. To me, the definition of a story is something that someone wants to listen to."

My Wicked Wicked Ways (1987), Cisneros's most widely known collection, contains the poems published originally in a chapbook titled *Bad Boys*. Discussing the title of her work in the *Americas Review*, Cisneros observed, "These are poems in which I write about myself, not a man writing about me. It is . . . my life story as told by me, not according to a male point of view. And that's where I see perhaps the 'Wicked Wicked' of the title." Citing her novel, Cisneros acknowledges, "A lot of the themes from *Mango Street* are repeated: I leave my father's house, I don't get married, I travel to other countries, I can sleep with men if I want to, I can abandon them or choose not to sleep with them, and yes, I can fall in love and even be hurt by men□all of these things but as told by me. I am not the muse."

Both Cisneros's fiction and her poetry emphasize some dominant themes. In discussing the quest for cultural identity, Cisneros asserts that "it's very strange to be straddling these two cultures and to try to define some middle ground so that you don't commit suicide or you don't become so depressed or you don't self explode. There has to be some way for you to say: 'Alright, the life I'm leading is alright. I'm not betraying my culture. I'm not becoming Anglicized.'"

In a 1993 interview Cisneros attributes her devotion to feminism, another recurrent theme, to her Mexican American mother: "My mom did things that were very non-traditional□for one, she didn't force me to learn how to cook. She didn't interrupt me to do chores when I was reading or studying. And she always told me, 'make sure you can take care of yourself.' And that was very different from other women, who felt they had to prepare their daughters to be a wife." Yet she remains aware of the price exacted by a revisionist approach to traditional mores, recalling in the *Americas Review*, "I felt, as a teenager, that I could not inherit my culture intact without revising some parts of it. That did not mean I wanted to reject the entire culture, although my brothers and my father thought I did. . . . I know that part of the trauma that I went through from my teen years

through the twenties up until very recently, and that other Latinas are going through too, is coming to terms with what Norma [Alarcón] calls 'reinventing ourselves,' revising ourselves. We accept our culture, but not without adapting ourselves as women."

For a Hispanic the question of cultural identity often involves language. Growing up, Cisneros spoke Spanish with her father and English with her mother. Her practice of interspersing Spanish terms and phrases in her writing, especially notable in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), which was written since her move to San Antonio, stems naturally from her bicultural background. Cisneros asserted in the 4 August 1991 *Chicago Tribune* that "if you're bilingual, you're doubly rich. You have two ways of looking at the world."

Again dramatizing the interconnection between the individual and the community through her focus on gender in interpersonal relationships, Cisneros in the twenty-two stories of *Woman Hollering Creek* explores the San Antonio setting, contrasting the socialization processes of *Mexicanas de éste y el otro lado* (Mexican women on both sides of the border) with those of their Anglo counterparts. The book's three major sections suggest a developmental progression from childhood to adulthood, and the thematic motifs of time, love, and religion also function as organizing principles.

The experience of cyclical and parallel patterns of time especially seems to be the collection's major unifying concept, as repeated actions and rites of passage allow Cisneros to make thematic interconnections. Time, for instance, appears as a metaphysical dilemma in "Eleven." The experience of immanence leads the child narrator to explore the notion of chronology: "when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today." Cisneros's narrator also views the passage of time in a context of behavioral expectations: "some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three." Finally, the child understands that the resolution of the paradox lies in conceiving time as a process of accretion: "when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one."

In "One Holy Night" the paradox of time is reflected in the characterization of Boy Baby, who "seemed boy and baby and man all at once." Similarly, his refutation of time□"the past and the future are the same thing"□is set against his proclaimed attempt to reenact ancient Mayan ways. The young female protagonist is told that she will become "Ixchel, his Queen" after undergoing a rite of passage, which turns out to be a rape. The experience is described as a clear-cut separation from the past: "something inside bit me, and I gave out a cry as if the other, the one I wouldn't be anymore, leapt out." The irony is underscored when the narrator, now a pregnant teenager who feels suspended in the present, says, "I don't think they understand how it is to be a girl. I don't think they know how it is to have to wait your whole life. I count the months for the baby to be born." A contrasting view of time is evident in "Eyes of Zapata," in which time becomes destiny. Zapata's long-standing lover, Inés Alfaro, states, "I . . . see our lives, clear and

still, far away and near. And I see our future and our past, Miliano, one single thread already lived and nothing to be done about it."

Parallel temporal paradigms are articulated in "*Bien* Pretty." According to the narrator, an educated Latina from San Francisco confused about her ethnic identity, "we have to let go of our present way of life and search for our past, remember our destinies." Conversely, her Mexican lover argues, "You Americans have a strange way of thinking about time. . . . You think old ages end, but that's not so. It's ridiculous to think one age has overcome another. American time is running alongside the calendar of the sun, even if your world doesn't know it."

Distraught at discovering that her lover must return to Mexico to tend to a wife, a mistress, and seven children, the narrator seeks solace in *telenovelas* (soap operas). However, she substitutes the "passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile, brave" women she has known in real life for the passive models on the screen. As a result, self-confidence returns, and aesthetic pleasure leads her to focus on the present, her *being* in the world: "the sky is throbbing. Blue, violet, peach, not holding still for one second. The sun setting . . . because it's today, today; with no thought of the future or past."

In keeping with the stereotype of the passionate Latina, many of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* revolve around love, Cisneros's second major organizing motif. To the author's credit, however, her approach is, for the most part, unorthodox. In "One Holy Night" love is defined as "a bad joke," as "a big black piano being pushed off the top of a three story building [while] you're waiting on the bottom to catch it," as "a top . . . spinning so fast . . . all that's left is the hum," and as a crazy man who "walked around all day with his harmonica in his mouth. . . . wheezing, in and out, in and out." The male lead of "*Bien* Pretty" defines love by means of a paradox, "I believe love is always eternal. Even if eternity is only five minutes." On the other hand, under the spell of *telenovelas*, the protagonist of "Woman Hollering Creek" lives for a masochistic version of passion, firmly believing that to "suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow." It takes female bonding to help her break away from her predicament as a battered woman.

The link between time and love is established through a pattern of cyclical repetition. "Never Marry a Mexican" focuses on unrequited love. Seeking revenge for having been seduced by her teacher and smarting from a protracted but essentially unfulfilling love affair, the female protagonist repeats the pattern by having an affair with her lover's son, who at that point happens to be her student. Seduction initiated by males, however, is more common in Cisneros's fiction. In "*Bien* Pretty" Flavio acknowledges the existence of a wife, a mistress, and seven children in Mexico. In "Eyes of Zapata" Inés Alfaro is aware of the numerous "pastimes" who, in addition to his wife, compete with her for the General's attention.

Moreover, patterns of cyclical repetition connect time to male violence. Inés Alfaro's mother was murdered after being gang-raped; Boy Baby appears to have murdered eleven women; and the battered wife of "Woman Hollering Creek" recalls grisly stories

that point to a pattern of socially condoned practices□"this woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one's cadaver, this one unconscious, this one beaten blue." In a much less brutal and depressing way, female power also takes on a cyclical pattern. Inés Alfaro acknowledges, "My Tía Chucha, she was the one who taught me to use my sight, just as her mother had taught her. The women in my family, we've always had the power to see with more than with our eyes."

Religion, the collection's third major unifying theme, might more accurately be defined as a faith in the intercession of certain spiritual figures in human dynamics. Though this cultural marker is treated in "Mericans" and "Anguiano Religious Articles," it is most developed in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," where Cisneros offers an array of ex-votos (petitions addressed to religious figures and accompanied by promises to do penance in return for the granting of requests). These offers of penance in their very nature contain the nuggets of stories. Local color emerges from the popularity of certain saints as well as through references to healers and African deities. The twenty-two pseudo exvotos in the story come from a wide range of people, including three heads of households, four young women, three grandparents, and a gay man.

The narrator, a Chicana artist who has been reading the ex-votos, rejects the traditional representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the passive endurance of pain endorsed by her mother and grandmother. "I wanted you bare-breasted, snakes in your hands. . . . All that self-sacrifice, all that silent suffering. Hell no. Not here. Not me." Her struggle against traditional mores, class values, and sexism results in a redefinition of and a challenge to the Catholic icon: "When I could see you in all your facets, all at once the Buddha, the Tao, the true Messiah, Yahweh, Allah, the Heart of the Sky, the Heart of the Earth, the Lord of the Near and Far, the Spirit, the Light, the Universe, I could love you." Thus Cisneros proves faithful to her purpose, as she defined it in a 20 May 1991 interview: "in my stories and life I am trying to show that U.S. Latinas have to reinvent, to remythologize, ourselves. A myth believed by almost everyone, even Latina women, is that they are passive, submissive, long-suffering, either a spit-fire or a Madonna. Yet those of us who are their daughters, mothers, sisters know that some of the fiercest women on this planet are Latina women."

Woman Hollering Creek won the P.E.N. Center West Award for best fiction in 1992. Also the winner of two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, Cisneros remarked on 20 December 1992 that "there are many Latino writers as talented as I am, but because we are published through small presses our books don't count. We are still the illegal aliens of the literary world." Cisneros has been a writer in residence at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and at the University of California at Irvine since she graduated with her master's degree from the writing program at the University of Iowa. Describing herself as "[n]obody's wife" and "nobody's mother" in 1993, the author currently "lives in a rambling Victorian painted in Mexican colors right on the San Antonio River amid pecan and mesquite trees."

Among other projects, Cisneros plans to write a second novel, "Caramelo," set in Mexico and the United States. In her December 1992 interview she said that her novel will focus on "Mexican love and the models we have of love." In a 4 August 1991

interview Cisneros asserted that she is also "particularly interested in exploring father-daughter relationships and aspects of growing up in 'the middle,' between Mexican and Mexican-American culture." She wants to examine the notions that one culture holds about the other, "what one said when the other wasn't around." But her dream, she admitted in December 1992, is to write a Chicana feminist *telenovela* because "It's a way to reach a lot of people." Today Cisneros is perhaps the most visible Chicana in mainstream literary circles. The vividness of her vignettes and the lyrical quality of her prose attest to her craft, about which Melita Marie Garza notes, "Cisneros is as exacting in her writing as she is brazen in her criticism. She rewrites even her shortest stories about twenty-five times."

By re-creating a Chicana child's perspective, Cisneros has already made a significant contribution to the development of the Chicano literary tradition. Moreover, by focusing on the socialization processes of the Chicana, she has criticized and challenged major stereotypes. Perhaps most important, Cisneros grounds her revisionist feminist perspective in everyday experience by highlighting the stamina of the women she has known in real life. Finally, the broad range of voices that appears in her texts□from historical figures such as Emiliano Zapata to fictional gay lovers□attests to her continued success in developing a flexible, yet personal, style.

As shown by the six reprintings of *The House on Mango Street* (1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, and 1992), Cisneros's reading public is steadily increasing. Her endorsement of bilingualism in *Woman Hollering Creek* as well as her focus on interfacing cultures and her willingness to adopt the popular soap-opera style suggest that, though Cisneros has already carved herself a niche in American literature, the best may be yet to come.

Source: Cynthia Tompkins, "Sandra Cisneros," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 152, *American Novelists Since World War II, Fourth Series*, edited by James Giles and Wanda Giles, Gale Research, 1995, pp. 35-41.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Elías discusses Cisneros's personal history and her body of writing.

Sandra Cisneros considers herself a poet and a short-story writer, although she has also authored articles, interviews, and book reviews concerning Chicano writers. She began writing at age ten, and she is one of the few Chicano authors trained in a formal creative-writing program. At the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1978. She has taught creative writing at all levels and has experience in educational and arts administration. Her creative work, though not copious, has already been the subject of scholarly papers in the areas of Chicano and women's studies. She has read her poetry at the Colegio de México in Mexico City; at a symposium on Chicano literature at the Amerikanistik Universität in Erlangen, Germany; and over Swedish Educational Radio. Some of her poetry is included in a collection of younger Chicano poets published in Calcutta, India. She has garnered several grants and awards in the United States and abroad, and her book *The House on Mango Street* (1983) was praised, winning the 1985 Before Columbus American Book Award.

Cisneros is a native of Chicago, where she grew up and attended Loyola University, graduating in 1976 with a B.A. in English. Her father was born in Mexico City to a family of means; his wanderlust and lack of interest in schooling led him to travel broadly and to venture into the United States. By chance he traveled through Chicago, met Sandra's mother, and decided to settle there for life. He and his family were influential in Sandra's maturation. Her mother came from a family whose men had worked on the railroad. Sandra grew up in a working-class family, as the only girl surrounded by six brothers. Money was always in short supply, and they moved from house to house, from one ghetto neighborhood to another. In 1966 her parents borrowed enough money for a down payment on a small, ugly, two-story bungalow in a Puerto Rican neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. This move placed her in a stable environment, providing her with plenty of friends and neighbors who served as inspirations for the eccentric characters in *The House on Mango Street*.

The constant moving during her childhood, the frequent forays to Mexico to see her father's family, the poor surroundings, and the frequent changing of schools made young Cisneros a shy, introverted child with few friends. Her love of books came from her mother, who saw to it that the young poet had her first library card before she even knew how to read. It took her years to realize that some people actually purchased their books instead of borrowing them from the library. As a child she escaped into her readings and even viewed her life as a story in which she was the main character manipulated by a romantic narrator.

"I don't remember reading poetry," Cisneros admits. "The bulk of my reading was fiction, and Lewis Carroll was one of my favorites." As she wrote her first poems, modeling them on the rhythmic texts in her primary readers, she had no notion of formal structure, but her ear guided her in matters of rhyme and rhythm. After the sixth grade, however,

Cisneros stopped writing for a while. In her junior year in high school she was exposed to works by the finest of British and American writers and by Latin-American poets who impressed her deeply. Finally, in her junior year at Loyola University, she was introduced to writers such as Donald Justice, James Wright, and Mark Strand, poets who had influenced a whole generation of Spanish writers, thus bringing Cisneros into touch with her cultural roots. She was also introduced to the Chicago poetry scene, where there was great interest in her work. She was encouraged to study in a creative-writing program and was admitted to the Iowa Writers' Workshop; she had hoped to study with Justice but discovered that he and Marvin Bell were on sabbatical leaves that academic year.

Cisneros looks back on those years and admits she did not know she was a Chicana writer at the time, and if someone had labeled her thus, she would have denied it. She did not see herself as different from the rest of the dominant culture. Her identity was Mexican, or perhaps Puerto Rican, because of the neighborhood she grew up in, but she mostly felt American□because all her reading was of mainstream literature, and she always wrote in English. Spanish was the private language of home, and she spoke it only with her father. Cisneros knew no Chicano writers in Chicago, and although she was the only Hispanic majoring in English at Loyola, she was unaware of being different□in spite of her appearance, which was considered exotic by her female classmates.

The two years at Iowa were influential on Cisneros's life and writing. She admits that the experience was terribly cruel to her as well as to many of the other first-year students, but it was also liberating. She had her share and fill of intimidating teachers and colleagues as well as some marvelous ones who helped and encouraged her. This was a time for Cisneros to mature emotionally, something she had neglected to do for some years□always having considered herself as somebody's daughter, lover, or friend. The poet struggled in these years with finding a voice for her writings. She imitated her teachers, her classmates, and what she calls the "terrible East-coast pretentiousness" that permeated the workshop, without finding satisfaction. An important friend at this time was Joy Harjo, a Native American from Oklahoma, who was well centered in her southwestern heritage and identity and who also felt lonely and displaced in the Iowa workshop. This friendship offered Cisneros the assurance that she had something to write about that would distinguish her from her classmates.

The bulk of Cisneros's early writing emerged in 1977 and 1978. She began writing a series of autobiographical sketches influenced by Vladimir Nabokov's memoirs. She purposely delighted in being iconoclastic, in adopting themes, styles, and verbal patterns directly opposed to those used by her classmates. *The House on Mango Street* was born this way, with a child's narrative voice that was to be Cisneros's poetic persona for several years.

The poem "Roosevelt Road," written in the summer of 1977, is most important to Cisneros because it forced her to confront the poverty and embarrassment she had lived with all her previous years and to admit the distinctiveness of this background as a positive resource that could nourish her writing. In this poem the language is completely

straightforward and descriptive of the tenement housing where the poet lived as a child. Lines run into one another, so that the reader is compelled to follow the inherent rhythm, while working on the sense of the message:

We lived on the third floor always
because noise travelled down
The milkman climbed up tired everyday
with milk and eggs
and sometimes sour cream.
.....
Mama said don't play in alleys
because that's where dogs get rabies and
bad girls babies
Drunks carried knives
but if you asked
they'd give you money.
.....
How one time we found that dollar
and a dead mouse in the stone wall
where the morning glories climbed. . . .

Once the journals *Nuestro* and *Revista Chicano- Riqueña* accepted her first poems, Cisneros gained enough confidence to submit her work to other publications. These early texts were more concerned with sound and timing, more with the *how* than with the *what*, of what she was saying. A case in point is "South Sangamon," in *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987), a poem which, when read aloud, corroborates the fact:

His drunk cussing,
her name all over the hallway
and my name mixed in.
He yelling from the other side open
and she yelling from this side no.
A long time of this
and we say nothing
just hoping he'd get tired and go.

Cisneros's master's thesis, titled "My Wicked, Wicked Ways" (Iowa, 1978), is full of such poems on a diversity of topics□daily events, self-identity, amorous experiences, and encounters with friends. Her penchant for sound is obvious, as is her representation of a world that is neither bourgeois nor mainstream. Revised and enlarged, the thesis was published as a book in 1987.

While Cisneros taught at Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago (July 1978-December 1980), she spent time on writing but never finished projects fully as collections. Her involvement with many aspects of student life was too draining and consumed her creative energy. However, one poem she wrote was selected to be posted on the Chicago area public buses, thus giving her much-needed exposure and

publicity. Cisneros was also seduced by the adulation and applause awarded to writers who read their material at public performances. After a period of "too much performing" (in her words) in coffee-houses and school auditoriums, she gave up the lecture circuit to spend more time on her writing.

Another Chicano poet, Gary Soto, was instrumental in helping publish Cisneros's chapbook *Bad Boys* in 1980. The seven poems depict childhood scenes and experiences in the Mexican ghetto of Chicago. One poem, "The Blue Dress," is Cisneros's effort to paint a scene full of visual imagery that depicts a pregnant woman seen through the eyes of the expectant father. The language of these poems has a musical ring, with short, run-on lines and compact statements.

By the time that *The House on Mango Street* was ready for publication, Cisneros had outgrown the voice of the child narrator who recounts the tales in the book, but this 1983 work gave Cisneros her broadest exposure. It is dedicated to "the women," and, in forty-four short narratives, it recounts the experiences of a maturing adolescent girl discovering life around her in a Hispanic urban ghetto. There are many touching scenes that Esperanza, the young narrator, recounts: her experiences with the death of relatives and neighbors, for example, and with girlfriends who tell her about life. In "Hips," young Esperanza explains: "The bones just one day open. One day you might decide to have kids, and then where are you going to put them?" Esperanza identifies herself to her readers: "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters." As the stories of Esperanza in her Hispanic barrio evolve, the child breezes through more and more maturing experiences.

The reader sees many portraits of colorful neighbors□Puerto Rican youths, fat ladies who do not speak English, childhood playmates□until finally Esperanza sees herself and her surrounding experiences with greater maturity. Thus the reader sees her at her first dance in the tale "Chanclas," where attention is first focused on the bulky, awkward saddle oxfords of a school-girl, then the vision is directed upward as Esperanza blossoms into a graceful and poised dancer, who draws everyone's glances. Esperanza retells humorous experiences about her first job and her eighth-grade girlfriend who marries; then Esperanza reveals more of her intimate self in the last two tales. In "A House of My Own" and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," it is revealed that the adolescent has been nurturing a desire to flee the sordid, tragicomic environment where she has grown up. The image of the house is also useful to reveal the need for the narrator to find a self-identity.

An important contribution by Cisneros to Chicano letters is that this book about growing up offers a feminine view of the process, in contrast to that exemplified by leading works by men. As critics Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo have aptly pointed out, young Esperanza is a courageous character who must combat the socialization process imposed on females; the character breaks from the tradition of the usual protagonist of the female bildungsroman by consistently rejecting the models presented to her and seeking another way to be Chicana: "I have begun my own kind of war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair

or picking up the plate." Esperanza's experiences parallel those depicted by other Chicana writers.

In conversations about her life, Cisneros admits that up through her college years she had always felt that she was not her own person. Thus Esperanza yearns for "a house all my own. . . . Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem." Cisneros's speaker feels the need to tell the world the stories about the girl who did not want to belong to that ugly house on Mango Street. Esperanza admits, at the conclusion of her stories, she is already too strong to be tied down by the house; she will leave and go far, only to come back some day for those stories and people that could not get away. The conclusion is that, in essence, Cisneros takes within her the memories from the house as she also carries her mementos from Mango Street, her bag of books and possessions. These are her roots, her inspirations, and the kernels of what Cisneros sensed, years ago in Iowa, that distinguished her from other American writers.

My Wicked Wicked Ways contains several texts that have been published singly. They show a different aspect of Cisneros's work. The speakers of several poems are adult women involved in relationships with a roguish male, Rodrigo. These poems are physically descriptive and sensuous□bordering on the erotic□and behind them lies a strong hand.

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991) is a rare example of a work by a Chicana being published by a mainstream press. Writer Ann Beattie has said of this collection: "My prediction is that Sandra Cisneros will stride right into the spotlight□though an aura already surrounds her. These stories about how and why we mythologize love are revelations about the constant, small sadnesses that erode our facades, as well as those unpredictably epiphanic moments that lift our hearts from despair. A truly wonderful book."

Cisneros has been fortunate to earn several grants that have permitted her to devote herself fulltime to her writing. In the spring of 1983 she was artist in residence at the Fondation Michael Karolyi in Vence, France. Earlier, in 1982, she received a National Endowment for the Arts grant, which she used to travel through Europe. During that time she began work on a series of poems she included in her 1987 book. Several of them are evidently based on fleeting encounters with men she met in her European travels. They are whimsical mementos of fleeting instances either enjoyed or lost. Still present are the familiar rhythm and musicality; the major change is in the themes and voice. Most definitely, she has outgrown the adolescent form of expression of her earlier writing.

In the late 1980s Cisneros completed a Paisano Dobie Fellowship in Austin, Texas, and then spent additional time in Texas. She also won first and third prizes for her short stories in the Segundo Concurso Nacional del Cuento Chicano, sponsored by the University of Arizona. Cisneros as a writer is growing rapidly. She feels that writers like herself, Soto, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Alberto Ríos belong to a new school of technicians, new voices in Chicano poetry. Cisneros wants to maintain her

distinctiveness and her dual inheritance and legacy, and not fuse into the American mainstream. She cannot tell in which direction her poetry will lead her; most recently she has expanded her writing to include essays. She hopes that years from now she will still be worthy of the title "poet" and that her peers will recognize her as such.

Source: Eduardo F. Elías, "Sandra Cisneros," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol.122, *Chicano Writers, Second Series*, edited by Francisco A. Lomeli and Carl R. Shirley, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 77-81.

Critical Essay #5

In the following interview, Cisneros discusses her works, the autobiographical elements in them, and her evolution as a woman.

[*Rodríguez Aranda*]: *Lets start with what I call the soil where Sandra Cisneros' "wicked" seed germinated. Your first book,* The House on Mango Street, *is it autobiographical?*

[Cisneros]: That's a question that students always ask me because I do a lot of lectures in Universities. They always ask: "Is this a true story?" or, "How many of these stories are true?" And I have to say, "Well they're all true." All fiction is non-fiction. Every piece of fiction is based on something that really happened. On the other hand, it's not autobiography because my family would be the first one to confess: "Well it didn't happen that way." They always contradict my stories. They don't understand I'm not writing autobiography.

What I'm doing is I'm writing true stories. They're all stories I lived, or witnessed, or heard; stories that were told to me. I collected those stories and I arranged them in an order so they would be clear and cohesive. Because in real life, there's no order.

All fiction is giving order to that. . . .

. . . to that disorder, yes. So, a lot of the events were composites of stories. Some of those stories happened to my mother, and I combined them with something that happened to me. Some of those stories unfortunately happened to me just like that. Some of the stories were my students' when I was a counselor; women would confide in me and I was so overwhelmed with my inability to correct their lives that I wrote about them.

How did the idea of Mango Street *turn into a book?*

The House on Mango Street started when I was in graduate school, when I realized I didn't have a house. I was in this class, we were talking about memory and the imagination, about Gustave Bachelard's *Poetics of Space.* I remember sitting in the classroom, my face getting hot and I realized: "My god, I'm different! I'm different from everybody in this classroom." You know, you always grow up thinking something's different or something's wrong, but you don't know what it is. If you're raised in a multi-ethnic neighborhood you think that the whole world is multi-ethnic like that. According to what you see in the media, you think that that's the norm; you don't ever question that you're different or you're strange. It wasn't until I was twenty-two that it first hit me how different I really was. It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn't think that had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn't make sense until that moment, sitting in that seminar. That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about. I couldn't write about what was going on in my life at that time. There was a lot of destructiveness; it was a

very stressful time for that reason, and I was too close to it, so I chose to write about something I was far removed from, which was my childhood.

So you are and you're not "Esperanza," the main character in The House on Mango Street. *Now, at some point she says to herself that she's bad. Is that something you felt when you were her age?*

Certainly that black-white issue, good-bad, it's very prevalent in my work and in other Latinas. It's something I wasn't aware of until very recently. We're raised with a Mexican culture that has two role models: La Malinche y la Virgen de Guadalupe. And you know that's a hard route to go, one or the other, there's no in-betweens.

The in-between is not ours. All the other role models are outside our culture, they're Anglo. So if you want to get out of these two roles, you feel you're betraying you're people.

Exactly, you're told you're a traitor to your culture. And it's a horrible life to live. We're always straddling two countries, and we're always living in that kind of schizophrenia that I call, being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture. In some sense we're not Mexican and in some sense we're not American. I couldn't live in Mexico because my ideas are too . . .

. . . progressive?

Yeah, too Americanized. On the other hand, I can't live in America, or I do live here but, in some ways, almost like a foreigner.

An outsider.

Yes. And it's very strange to be straddling these two cultures and to try to define some middle ground so that you don't commit suicide or you don't become so depressed or you don't self explode. There has to be some way for you to say: "Alright, the life I'm leading is alright, I'm not betraying my culture. I'm not becoming anglicized." I was saying this last night to two Latinas in San Antonio. It's so hard for us to live through our twenties because there's always this balancing act, we've got to define what we think is fine for ourselves instead of what our culture says.

At the same time, none of us wants to abandon our culture. We're very Mexican, we're all very Chicanas. Part of being Mexicana is that love and that affinity we have for our *cultura.* We're very family centered, and that family extends to the whole Raza. We don't want to be exiled from our people.

Even in the eighties, Mexican women feel there are all these expectations they must fulfill, like getting married, having children. Breaking with them doesn't mean you are bad, but society makes you feel that way. . . .

Part of it is our religion, because there's so much guilt. It's so hard being Catholic, and even though you don't call yourself Catholic anymore, you have vestiges of that guilt

inside you; it's in your blood. Mexican religion is half western and half pagan; European Catholicism and Pre-columbian religion all mixed in. It's a very strange Catholicism like nowhere else on the planet and it does strange things to you. There's no one sitting on your shoulder but you have the worst censor of all, and that's yourself.

I found it very hard to deal with redefining myself or controlling my own destiny or my own sexuality. I still wrestle with that theme, it's still the theme of my last book, *My Wicked Wicked Ways,* and in the new one that I've started and the one that comes after, so it's a ghost I'm still wrestling with.

Talking about ghosts, would you say that writing is a way of getting rid of your guilt, of saying: "You might think I'm wicked, but it's not about being wicked, it's about being me." Some kind of exorcism. . . .

I used to think that writing was a way to exorcise those ghosts that inhabit the house that is ourselves. But now I understand that only the little ghosts leave. The big ghosts still live inside you, and what happens with writing - I think a more accurate metaphor would be to say - that you make your peace with those ghosts. You recognize they live there. . . .

That they're part of you. . . .

They're part of you and you can talk about them, and I think that it's a big step to be able to say: "Well, yeah, I'm haunted, ha! There's a little ghost there and we coexist."

Maybe I'll always be writing about this schizophrenia of being a Mexican American woman, it's something that in every stage of my life has affected me differently. I don't think it's something I could put to rest. I'll probably still be writing about being good or bad probably when I'm ninety years old.

It didn't seem to me that in My Wicked Wicked Ways *there was a conflict over being a Hispanic woman. What I saw was the telling of different experiences, memories from childhood, travels, love affairs . . . of course you can't get away from the fact that you are Mexican and that you experience life in a certain way because of this.*

These are poems in which I write about myself, not a man writing about me. It is my autobiography, my version, my life story as told by me, not according to a male point of view. And that's where I see perhaps the "Wicked Wicked" of the title.

A lot of the themes from *Mango Street* are repeated: I leave my father's house, I don't get married, I travel to other countries, I can sleep with men if I want to, I can abandon them or choose not to sleep with them, and yes, I can fall in love and even be hurt by men - all of these things but as told by me. I am not the muse.

Some men were disappointed because they thought the cover led them on. They thought it was a very sexy cover and they wanted . . . I don't know what they wanted! But they felt disappointed by the book. The cover is of a woman appropriating her own

sexuality. In some ways, that's also why it's wicked; the scene is trespassing that boundary by saying: "I defy you. I'm going to tell my own story."

You see, I grew up with six brothers and a father. So, in essence I feel like I grew up with seven fathers. To this day when any man tells me to do something in certain way, the hair on the back of my neck just stands up and I'll start screaming! Then I have to calm down and realize: "Well, alright, okay, you know where this came from, you don't even need an analyst to figure this one out!"

In Mango Street *there's a story called "Beautiful and Cruel," where Esperanza obviously feels an admiration towards the woman in the movies who was "beautiful and cruel," the one "with red red lips" whose power "is her own." Is that why you colored your lips on the black and white photograph of the cover of* My Wicked Wicked Ways?

I never thought about that. I was looking at women who are models of power. I suppose that for someone like Esperanza the only powerful women she would see would be the same type that Manuel Puig idolizes, those black and white screen stars. People like Rita Hayworth, the red-lip women that were beautiful. They didn't have to cling to someone, rather they snuff people out like cigarettes. They were the ones in control, and that was the only kind of role model I had for power. You had to have beauty, and if you didn't have that, you were lost. The cover was trying to play on the Errol Flynn years of film, the lettering and everything.

I got a lot of objections to that photo. People said, "Why did you paint the lips? It's a good photo." The photographer himself didn't want his photograph adulterated. But then, if the lips weren't painted then you'd think I was serious.

When did you realize that you wanted to be a writer or that you were a writer?

Every time I say I'm a writer, it still surprises me. It's one of those things, that every time you say it . . . me suena muy curioso. It's like saying "I'm a faith healer." Sounds a little bit like a quack when you say it; something a little immodest, a little crazy, admitting you're a writer.

I guess the first time I legitimately started saying that's what I was instead of that's what I wanted to be was when I was in graduate school, when we all had the audacity to claim our major as what we were. But you never get used to saying it because we've always had to make our living other ways. I had to be a teacher, a counselor, I've had to work as an Arts Administrator, you know, all kinds of things just to make my living. The writing is always what you try to save energy for, it's your child. You hope you're not too exhausted so that you can come home to that child and give it everything you can.

It's hard to claim in this society that that's what you are. I feel a little more legitimate saying it these days after I've been doing it professionally for more than ten years. When I'm riding on a plane and I'm off to do a lecture somewhere and the person to the right of me says: "Well, what do you do?" I don't say "I'm a professor," because I only started doing that recently and that doesn't have anything to do with writing. I say "I'm a

writer." And the next question always is: "Oh, do you publish?" That really makes me mad like you have to have your vitae with you. But it's nice to say, "Yes, I do."

There's a story in The House on Mango Street *where Esperanza goes to the fortuneteller, who tells her she sees a home in the heart. Did it become true for you, this home in the heart?*

The story impressed me very much because it is exactly what I found out, years after I'd written the book, that the house in essence becomes you. You are the house. But I didn't know that when I wrote it. The story is based on something that happened to me when I went to see a witch-woman once. Going to see that woman was so funny because I didn't understand half the s--- she told me, and later on I tried to write a poem about her. The poem didn't work, but a lot of the lines stayed, including the title, so I decided, well, I'll write a story to include in *House on Mango Street.* Her response is at the end when Esperanza says: "Do you see anything else in the glass for my future?" and she says: "A home in the heart, I was right." I don't know where that came from. I just wrote it, and thought: "That sounds good. Kind of sounds like 'anchor of arms' and the other ambiguous answers that the witch-woman is giving the girl."

Two years after I wrote that, when the book finally came out, I was frightened because I had no idea how these pieces were going to fit together. I was making all of these little *cuentitos*, like little squares of a patchwork quilt, hoping that they would match, that somehow there wouldn't be a big hole in the middle. I said, "I think it's done but, *quién sabe!"* So when I saw the book complete, when I opened it and read it from front to back for the first time as a cold thing, in the order that it was, I looked and said, "Oh my goodness, *qué curioso!"* It is as if I knew all of these symbols.

I suppose a Jungian critic would argue: "Yes, you always do know in some sense. This writing comes from the same deep level that dreams and poetry come from, so maybe you're not conscious of it when you're writing, but your subconscious is aware."

It surprised me, and it's also a strange coincidence that I would write the things that eventually I would live. That, yes, I did find a home in the heart, just like Elenita, the witch-woman predicted. I hope that other women find that as well.

What is your home of your heart made of?

I've come this year to realize who I am, to feel very very strong and powerful, I am at peace with myself and I don't feel terrified by anyone, or by any terrible word that anyone would launch at me from either side of the border. I guess I've created a house made of bricks that no big bad wolf can blow down now.

I didn't feel that by the end of My Wicked Wicked Ways *you had that house yet.*

No, because, see, those poems were all written during the time I was writing *The House on Mango Street,* some of them before. They're poems that span from when I was twenty-one years old all the way through the age of thirty. It's a chronological book. If anything, I think that the new book, the *Loose Woman* book is more a celebration of that

house in the heart, and *My Wicked Wicked Ways* I would say is in essence my wanderings in the desert.

The last poem in the book is the only one in Spanish. When I read this poem, maybe because my first language is Spanish - but I don't think it is only that - it felt to me the most vulnerable. Your language was more simple, direct, straight to the heart. The poem is called "Tantas Cosas Asustan, Tantas."

"So Many Things Terrify, So Many."

Do you write more in Spanish?

I never write in Spanish, y no es que no quiero sino que I don't have that same palate in Spanish that I do in English. No tengo esa facilidad. I think the only way you get that palate is by living in a culture where you hear it, where the language is not something in a book or in your dreams. It's on the loaf of bread that you buy, it's on the radio jingle, it's on the graffiti you see, it's on your ticket stub. It must be all encompassing.

You have two books published now and you're working on four.

I really have three books. I have a chap book, *Bad Boys,* that preceded this book of poetry and it's out of print now.

So, you are always getting some kind of criticism, comments, etc. How does that affect you? When you write, are you aware of an audience?

Well, sometimes, but not really. Poetry is a very different process from fiction. I feel in some ways that I'm more conscious of my audience when I'm writing fiction, and I'm not conscious of them when I'm writing poetry, or hardly. Poetry is the art of telling the truth, and fiction is the art of lying. The scariest thing to me is writing poetry, because you're looking at yourself *desnuda.* You're always looking at the part of you that you don't show anybody. You're looking at the part of you that maybe you'd show your husband. The part that your siblings or your parents have never even seen. And that center, that terrifying center, is a poem. That's why you can't think of your audience, because if you do, they're going to censor your poem, in the way that if you think about yourself thinking about the poem, you'll censor the poem, see? That's why it's so horrible, because you've got to go beyond censorship when you write, you've got to go deeper, to a real subterranean level, to get at that core of truth. You don't even know what the truth is! You just have to keep writing and hope that you'll come upon something that shocks you. When you think: "Oh my goodness, I didn't know I felt that!" that's where you stop. That's the little piece of gold that you've been looking for. That's a poem. It's quite a different process from writing fiction, because you know what you're going to say when you write fiction. To me, the definition of a story is something that someone wants to listen to. If someone doesn't want to listen to you, then it's not a story.

I was reading an article discussing how there could be more audience for poetry, that one mistake is thinking that poetry is not storytelling.

Poetry can be storytelling. As a critic said, my poetry is very narrative, and is very poetic. I always denied when I wrote *House on Mango Street* that I was a fiction writer. I'd say: "I'm a poet, I just write this naively." But now I see how much of a storyteller I've always been. Because even though I wasn't writing stories, I was talking stories. I think it is very important to develop storytelling abilities. The way I teach writing is based on the oral word. I test all my stories out with my class. When I have every student in that class looking up and listening to me, I know I've got a good story. There's something in it that makes them want to listen. I ask my students, "Do you take notes in my class when I tell you stories?" They go, "No." "How many stories that I've told you, since the beginning of this semester, can you remember?" Ooooah! They all came back with these stories, they could remember them! "You didn't have to take notes. You didn't have to study, right? Why? See how wonderful stories are? You remember!"

You remember the ones that are important to you or that affect you, and you filter out the ones que no te sirven. It's just a nice thing about fiction. To me that's a test of what a good story is: if someone listens to you and if it stays with you. That's why fairy tales and myths are so important to a culture; that's why they get handed down. People don't need to write them down! I think that, even if we didn't have them written down, they would be alive as long as they fulfilled a function of being necessary to our lives. When they no longer spoke to us, then we'd forget.

I've always been interested in trying to understand the function of the myth. It's still kind of a puzzle to me. The way I see it now is that we're sort of in a crisis partly because we don't seem to have that many contemporary myths.

I think that there are urban myths, modern myths, only we can't tell which ones are really going to last. I think that maybe the visual is taking the place of the oral myth. Sometimes I have to make allusions in my class. If I said, "Now, do you remember when Rumple .. . ?" They'd say: "Who?" or they more or less would know the story. Or if I'd make an allusion to the "Little Mermaid" or the "Snow Queen," which are very important fairy tales to me, and an integral part of my childhood and my storytelling ability today! . . . ¡No hombre! They didn't know what I was talking about. But if I made an illusion to Fred Flintstone, everyone knew who Fred Flintstone was. Ha, ha! It's kind of horrible in a way that I have to resort to the television characters to make a point. That was our common mythology, that's what we all had in common, television.

You've said a lot of positive things about your teaching, what else is in it for you, and does it sometimes get in the way of your writing?

I complain about my students and say how they're always sucking my blood. Ha! But they would never kill me or suck my blood if I didn't let them. I will work very hard for students that work hard for me; it's a contract thing, you know, you have to work for each other. I tell my students all the time that teaching and writing don't have anything to do with one another. And I say that because when I'm writing on a weekend, then that following week I'm kind of half-ass as a teacher: I didn't read through their stories well enough, I didn't have time to read them ahead of time, I read them in class for the first time, and so I have to steal their time in order to be a writer. When I'm teaching and

doing a really kick-ass job that week, my private time gets stolen because I can't write. My creativity is going towards them and to my teaching and to my one-on-one with them. I never find a balance. I can't have it both ways, they don't have anything to do with one another.

On the one hand, I get encouraged to be a writer. They like it that I'm a writer, they like that I publish, that I lecture. Everywhere I've worked writing's always been kind of an interruption to my other duties. On the other hand, as a writer, I can't understand the priorities that academia has towards titles and towards time and deadlines, I don't work like that.

It helps that I call myself a writer because they think: "Oh well, she's just a writer, that's why she can't get her grades in on time," or "That's why she wears those funny clothes and has her hair so funny . . . she's a writer." The way universities are set up is very counter-creative. The environment, the classroom, the times; the way that people have to leave when you're in the middle of a sentence to go to another class is counter-creative. The fact that I have to be there on time boggles me. My students would get all upset if I'd come fifteen minutes late, and I'd say, "What are you so upset about? If I was in a cafe, would you leave?" They'd say, "Nooo." "I would wait for you. Why are you all so upset about?" You'd have to be there a certain time or right away they'd want to leave. That inflexibility with time to me doesn't make sense. I know that some of them might have to go to another class but that's not the way that I would like to do it. I would like to start the class when I get there and finish when we finish. Usually we don't run out ready in two hours, I want to go on. And I want to go out and drink with all of them, and have some coffee or beer after class, because I think the real learning keeps going.

We talk about that, we talk about what would we like if we could have any type of environment we would choose, and any kind of schedule. Sometimes we spend a whole class talking about what's important in making ourselves more creative and we come up with a whole, exaggerated list of demands, which we give to the chair: "We want a house by the country. . . ." It's fun to talk about those things because you start articulating what's important to you. Maybe we can't have a house in the country, but we realize we need a quiet space to write; alright, maybe we can't all go out and spend a weekend in Europe but we could take a trip to the next town by ourselves. I always feel that when we get off the track like that on a subject in class, it's important. I say: "Forget about my lesson plan because we're going to get on the track by going off the track." Some of my students don't like that about me, that I'll throw the lesson plan, or I won't have a lesson plan or I'll throw the whole syllabus out the window and say, "Well, that's not going to work, I've changed my mind." But it is precisely because I come from an anti-academic experience that I'm very good at teaching writing.

In The House on Mango Street *you were "bad," then you went through the times of figuring out who you were and you came out "wicked," and now you say you're working on being a "loose woman," how does that fit in with your solid brick house?*

I love that title: *Poemas Sueltos.* I was thinking of Jaime Sabines' book: *Poemas sueltos, Loose Poems,* because they didn't belong to any other collection. I started

writing these poems after being with other women this last spring, and getting so energized. I had a whole series that I continued on through the summer and I thought: "These loose poems don't belong anywhere." I was in the bathroom in Mexico City, sitting on the pot and thinking, "What can I do with these poems, what would I call them? They're loose poems. But they're loose 'women' poems." You see? I'm reinventing the word "loose." I really feel that I'm the loose and I've cut free from a lot of things that anchored me. So, playing on that, the collection is called *Loose Woman.*

It is because your home in the heart is now so strong that you can be loose.

Yes. Like there is a poem called "New Tango," it's about how I like to dance alone. But the tango that I'm dancing is not a man over a woman, but a "new" tango that I dance by myself. Chronologically it follows the books as a true documentation of where the house of my heart is right now.

Source: Pilar E. Rodriquez Aranda, Interview with Sandra Cisneros, in *Americas Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Spring 1990, pp. 64-80.

Adaptations

Cisneros made an audio recording of *Loose Woman*, issued in 1994 by Random House Audio.

Topics for Further Study

The poem is an expression of romantic love. What is the nature of romantic love? What are its characteristics? Is romantic love the supreme kind of love, or are there other kinds of love that are equally valuable?

Research the lives of three Chicano authors or other authors of color (African American, Asian American, Native American, etc.). Based on your research and your own or your friends' experiences, detail some challenges faced by someone growing up with a dual cultural identity. Provide examples of ways someone can be an American and at the same time preserve one's original cultural heritage.

The poem suggests that creativity springs from love remembered. What else inspires poets to write poems, or novelists to write novels? Read several interviews with your favorite authors. What state of mind does a person have to be in to be creative? Provide examples from the interviews, along with your own ideas.

Compare "Once Again I Prove the Theory of Relativity" with another love poem of your choice. What are the similarities and differences between the two? Which poem is more effective at conveying its meaning? Why?

What Do I Read Next?

Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is a story about the coming-of-age of Esperanza, a Chicana growing up in an impoverished innercity neighborhood in Chicago.

Bless Me, Ultima (1972), by Rudolfo Anaya, is a classic of Chicano literature. It tells the story of a young Mexican American boy growing up in New Mexico and coming to terms with his dual cultural identity.

From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican-American Culture (1998; 2d ed.), by James Diego Vigil, is a readable introduction to the Mexican American experience in the United States. Vigil covers each stage of Mexican American history, from pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial times to Mexican independence and nationalism to the modern Anglo American period. He analyzes the social and cultural dynamics that shaped contemporary Chicano life.

Growing Up Chicana/o (1995), edited by Tiffany Ana Lopez, contains twenty autobiographical essays and stories that explore the Mexican American experience from many angles. One of the essays is by Cisneros, who discusses her memories of growing up in Chicago.

Mirrors beneath the Earth: Short Fiction by Chicano Writers (1992), edited by Ray Gonzalez, is a collection of thirty-one short stories by contemporary Chicano writers. It includes established figures such as Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, Denise Chavez, and Ana Castillo, as well as new writers such as Daniel Romero, Patricia Blanco, Ana Baca, and others.

Further Study

Cisneros, Sandra, "From a Writer's Notebook," in *Americas Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1987, pp. 69-79.

This article includes three essays in which Cisneros discusses her motivations and development as a writer, her literary influences, and the differences between Spanish and English syntax.

Ganz, Robin, "Sandra Cisneros: Border Crossings and Beyond," in *MELUS*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 19-29.

Ganz gives a review of Cisneros's life and work that discusses the origins of her literary career and assesses the nature of her achievements.

Jussawalla, Feroza, and Reed Way Dasenbrock, eds., *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, University Press of Mississippi, 1992.

This work includes interviews with fourteen writers from a diverse group of nations, including Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, India, Pakistan, New Zealand, and the Caribbean islands, as well as three Chicano writers from the United States, including Cisneros. Cisneros discusses her life and career as a Chicana writer in a mostly Anglo culture.

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, *Sandra Cisneros: Latina Writer and Activist*, Enslow Publishers, 1998.

Mirriam-Goldberg provides an enthusiastic survey of Cisneros's life and work, which emphasizes her perseverance in overcoming poverty and cultural biases. This work also discusses her political activities on behalf of Latino workers. Included along with the text are black-and-white photographs.

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Cisneros, Sandra, *Loose Woman*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

Nash, Susan Smith, Review of *Loose Woman*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 69, No. 1, Winter 1995, pp. 145-46.

Niño, Raúl, "An Interview with Sandra Cisneros," in *Booklist*, Vol. 90, No. 1, September 1, 1993, pp. 36-37.

Review of *Loose Woman*, in *Publishers Weekly*, April 25, 1994, p. 61.

Satz, Martha, "Returning to One's House: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros," in *Southwest Review*, Vol. 82, No. 2, Spring 1997, pp. 166-85.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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