

SOMODY, JOHN PETER, M.A. *Imperialism Displaced, Imperialism Inverted: The Trope of the Other World in Gulliver's Travels and The Chronicles of Narnia*. (2007) Directed by Dr. Christopher Hodgkins. 28 pp.

The purpose of the research was to assess the influence of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels on C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, with the primary concerns being Christian Humanism and British imperialism.

The primary texts employed were very similar in the ways in which psychological maturity, physical size, and animal imagery were used to present a critique of the evils of empire and imperialism. The research is more concerned with the similarities between Swift and Lewis' respective texts than with the differences between those respective texts.

The result of the research showed that while Lewis is less scathing in his critique of imperialism, he "inherits" from Jonathan Swift a sarcastic attitude towards imperialism for the purpose of personal gain. Lewis' text The Four Loves was used as a lens through which Gulliver's Travels and The Chronicles of Narnia can be read with regards to religious hypocrisy. The Biblical character Samson also proved essential as an archetypal Christ parallel to which Gulliver and Aslan can both be compared.

SOMODY, JOHN PETER, M.A. *Infiltrating the Canon: The Recreation of the Bildungsroman in Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street*. (2007)  
Directed by Dr. Karen L. Kilcup. 29 pp.

The project assesses Cisneros's House on Mango Street from several different angles, showing how, as a postmodern, Mexican-American female author, she draws on several important literary and cultural traditions. Among the essay's main concerns are the *bildungsroman* tradition, the notion of the self-made man (or self-made woman, in the case of the protagonist, Esperanza Cordero), and the use of Biblical discourse, which Cisneros employs both implicitly and explicitly throughout her text.

Cisneros weaves these threads together in a densely textured, genre-transforming narrative: Christ is the quintessential "self-made man," and the *bildungsroman* takes on new meaning when the author juxtaposes the American Dream to the realities of life in the United States for poor, uneducated, Mexican immigrants and their children. Esperanza's name literally means "Lamb of Hope," and this translation suggests a lens through which to read her developmental narrative. Cisneros's protagonist forms her identity and develops her own power by learning from the mistakes as well as the successes of those who have come before her. In the process, she comes to understand that individual authority and freedom require responsibility to the community, those who "cannot out."

IMPERIALISM DISPLACED, IMPERIALISM INVERTED: THE TROPE OF THE  
OTHER WORLD IN GULLIVER'S TRAVELS AND THE CHRONICLES OF  
NARNIA

AND

INFILTRATING THE CANON: THE RECREATION OF THE *BILDUNGSROMAN*  
IN SANDRA CISNEROS' THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

by

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IMPERIALISM DISPLACED, IMPERIALISM INVERTED: THE TROPE OF THE  
OTHER WORLD IN GULLIVER'S TRAVELS AND THE CHRONICLES OF  
NARNIA

In reading C.S. Lewis' fiction, it may be helpful to the reader to think of Lewis as a kind of literary heir to Jonathan Swift. Swift and Lewis are both Christian Humanists—they both value the individual on the basis that Christ valued the individual. It is no coincidence, then, that Lewis borrows from Swift both form and content in the writing of The Chronicles of Narnia (Keefer 211). Lewis makes use of many of the same tropes and motifs in order to formulate his own critique of British imperialism: as an allegory of Christian spiritual formation, the Chronicles of Narnia present more or less explicitly, a scathing critique of “non-Christian” behavior, which includes imperialism. Important among the tropes that Lewis “borrows” from Swift are the displacement of British imperial thinking and the situations that result from it to other worlds, the significance of the child as both subject and reader, and the use of various animals in order to create meaning. Stage of development and size also perform important roles here. While Swift's Gulliver's Travels were not intended specifically for children, there is something about their satirical, ridiculous nature that appeals to that specific audience. According to Robert Demaria,

We follow his [Gulliver's] exploits on his four voyages with an interest in his experience, his development, and his survival. Many successful adaptations of Gulliver's Travels for the screen, for children's books, and for pictorial representation reflect this sort of reading, and much of the continued success of the book must be attributed to that (Swift ix).

In a sense, The Chronicles of Narnia are the inverse of Gulliver's Travels in that they were written more specifically for children, but also provide a scathing, highly-developed critique of imperialism. Gulliver's Travels provides the same kind of scathing critique on which Lewis would most likely have modeled his own, but it is doubtful that Swift intended Gulliver's Travels for children's literature, just as it is doubtful that he intended *A Modest Proposal* to be met by the eyes of children. It is more likely that Swift is appealing to the child-like imagination of his adult readership, the same imagination that drove many of Swift's contemporaries to be interested in colonization. Paradoxically, for Swift and Lewis, there is (usually) something innocent about children, and this something protects them from the temptations of imperialism: in the world which contains Narnia, they are referred to as "sons and daughters of Adam and Eve," and Lewis makes it explicit that this has both positive and negative connotations. I say that this is a paradox because the opposite is also true: there is something childish and immature about the adults in both of these authors' works that drives them to be evil, and this evil is most often manifested through imperialism. Gulliver as protagonist is not evil. If anything, he makes his best attempt at an ethical encounter with the "others" whom he meets on his travels, but Swift the author constructs Gulliver's Travels in such a way that implies that such an encounter is idealistic rather than realistic. It is also significant that Gulliver as

colonizer becomes the colonized in these encounters, which suggests that colonization is in many cases more trouble than it is worth: Gulliver “repeatedly condemns colonialism as wasteful for both colonizer and colonized” (von Sneidern 83). Yet Gulliver comes home from each voyage only to take to the sea once again; like Edmund’s taste for the exotic “Turkish Delight” in Lewis’ The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, there is something addictive about the attempt to colonize.

It should become obvious to the reader as early as Book I of Gulliver’s Travels that the author is satirizing travel log authors such as William Dampier, whom Gulliver claims is a relative of his (Swift 5). Swift satirizes such accounts by using them as a model for composition, and in doing so, makes fun of them. The small size of the Lilliputians is a notable signifier—it is hard to take them seriously, because of how petty they are. Size, then, becomes a metaphor for maturity: what the Lilliputians lack where maturity is concerned, they also lack in size. It is significant that the Lilliputians turn the breaking of eggs into an international debate; for them, to break an egg at the small end is a “fundamental doctrine” which the “*Big-Endian* exiles” have blasphemed. This is one of many instances in Gulliver’s Travels in which Swift’s biting sarcasm truly shines. The Lilliputians are so petty that they have turned something trivial into an issue of diplomacy: they have blown it out of proportion, and it is implied that this sense of disproportion is so obvious to Gulliver because of his size.

In Book II of Gulliver’s Travels, the tables are turned in the sense that while Gulliver is still the conquered rather than the conqueror, it is now he who is small, while his “oppressors” are very large. Gulliver is thought by the Brobdingnagians to be some



sort of small animal, and is treated as such, despite the fact that he proves himself to be a rational creature. Gulliver calls them barbarians as a result of their poor treatment of him, and yet the description he gives of them confirms that they are “human” over and over again. Swift the author seems to be implying that “size” is relative, and that imperialistic ideology seems to advocate the oppression of the other simply because that oppression is possible. The Brobdingnagian treatment of Gulliver is no doubt reminiscent of the treatment of Native Americans brought back to England by explorers: just as the “red man” was given freak show status by the British empire, Gulliver’s farmer takes him to market and puts him on display to make a profit, which is extremely taxing to Gulliver, who is significantly weakened by the long hours that he is shown at market. The only Brobdingnagian that treats Gulliver in an ethical manner is his “nurse,” the young girl Glumdalclitch, which speaks to the idea of children as innocents. Glumdalclitch does her best to care for Gulliver, who tells the reader that

I should be guilty of great Ingratitude if I omitted this honourable Mention of her Care and Affection towards me, which I heartily wish it lay in my Power to requite as she deserves, instead of being the innocent but unhappy Instrument of her Disgrace, as I have too much reason to fear (Swift 90).

It is no wonder that Aslan is constantly bringing children to Narnia as vessels of reform; Swift and Lewis both seem to advocate the idea that children of a certain age are able to hold “otherness” in awe without feeling a need to conquer it. Edmund from The Lion,

The Witch and the Wardrobe and the young female Yahoo from Book IV of Gulliver's Travels are both examples of exceptions to this rule.

Book I of The Chronicles of Narnia begins with a paradox: the four children are sent away from London because of the war, and end up fighting in one. They are transported to Narnia via a wardrobe made out of an apple tree grown from a Narnian seed, where it is their destiny to aid Aslan in the defeat of the White Witch. The White Witch is a giantess and a descendent of Lilith, the first wife of Adam. Lewis's references to mythology are more explicit/heavy-handed than Swift's; while Swift does seem to be making reference to the giants of the Old Testament in Book II of Gulliver's Travels, Lewis couldn't reveal these parallels any more explicitly than he does in The Chronicles. As a Christian Humanist, Lewis is an advocate of taking responsibility for one's actions: since humans brought evil into Narnia, it then becomes their job to clean up after it, as far as Aslan is concerned. This idea is echoed in The Four Loves:

Our habit of talking as if England's motives for acquiring an empire...had been mainly altruistic [has] nauseated the world...If our country's cause is the cause of God, wars must be wars of annihilation. A false transcendence is given to things that are very much of this world (Lewis 45-46, 48-49; quoted in Hodgkins, 243).

Since Aslan brought Edmund into Narnia, and since it was Aslan who made the filling of the four thrones at Cair Paravel necessary in order that "the evil time be over and done" (The Lion 76), it then becomes Aslan's responsibility to die in Edmund's place. Lewis believes it is man's responsibility to make the world a better place via his encounters

with others; as humans, the children that Aslan brings to Narnia are not only descendants of Adam and Eve, but also connected to Aslan in a mysterious way. There is something Calvinistic about Lewis' Chronicles (though Lewis wasn't a Calvinist per se) in that one's destiny and the traits that allow one to face one's destiny are somehow interrelated. However, the kind of Calvinism to which Lewis subscribes to is still suggestive of a perfect love. Lewis has a much better outlook than Swift; by the end of Gulliver's Travels, Gulliver has become not unlike his oppressors, which suggests that vice is more likely to win out than virtue. Lewis doesn't seem to believe this at all; if there is anything ironic regarding the way in which The Chronicles should be interpreted, then that irony lies in the fact that Aslan and the Christian God that he represents always have a back-up plan to counter-attack any problem that arises. Lewis makes his belief in Christ as a punisher of the wicked quite clear in his choice of a lion as the parallel in The Chronicles, but Aslan cannot necessarily be considered "savage" because his purpose is not to punish the wicked simply for the sake of punishing the wicked, but rather to return the state of things to their natural order.

In The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, the first acquaintance that Edmund makes upon entering Narnia is the White Witch, who asks him if he is a "son of Adam" (Lewis 28). Edmund is only confused by this, and so the White Witch tells him, "I can see you are an idiot, whatever else you may be." This encounter is not unlike the many encounters that took place between natives and colonizers. The colonizers often took advantage of the natives' confusion, demanding to be worshipped like gods. The White Witch has her own agenda, and deceives Edmund simply because she can: she is

conscious of Aslan's power as well Edmund's significance in Narnia, but has ruled Narnia for one hundred years. Like the colonizers, the White Witch's possession of Narnia is justified by the means through which she obtained that possession—in this sense, the White Witch is very much like Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who can also be thought of as a colonizer of sorts. In the same way that Satan tempts Eve with the apple, the White Witch "conquers" Edmund by seducing him with Turkish Delight.

Turkish Delight as a foreign delicacy evokes images of the exotic East, and colonization initially stemmed from the profit that was promised by finding quicker, more efficient routes to Asia. According to Hodgkins, "[in *Paradise Lost*] there is more at work in Satan's successful voyage than mariner's luck, skill, and perseverance; there is also, more essentially, interpersonal guile" (67). Just as Cortés "found Montezuma's outlying imperial vassals ripe for rebellion and sought their aid and direction," the White Witch uses Edmund's agency to her own advantage, playing on his rebellion against his older brother and sister, promising him a kingdom of his own, and tempting him with magical Turkish Delight. This is no ordinary Turkish Delight: "anyone who had once tasted it would want more and more of it, and would even, if they were allowed, go on eating it till they killed themselves" (*The Lion* 33). The White Witch also promises to make Edmund her heir, having no children of her own; Edmund's hunger for power parallels his hunger for Turkish Delight. Lewis is suggesting that the desire to consume the "forbidden fruit" that exotic lands have to offer is a kind of hunger that cannot be satisfied. As a Christian, Lewis is also suggesting that imperialism is damaging to the colonizer because the colonizer becomes a slave to something which will never satisfy

him, but only cause him to want more: hence Edmund's gorging of himself on Turkish Delight is synonymous with imperial greed, and both, in turn, can be understood in much the same way that substance abuse can be understood. Edmund is completely taken in by the promises of the White Witch and wants her to teach his brother and sisters a lesson. His fear of her begins to dissipate, to the point that he is making demands of her, just as those who were sent out by the monarchy as tools for conquering new lands often found themselves writing back to the monarchy to demand more funding and resources. The difference between Edmund and Gulliver, then, seems to be a result of the fact that *Gulliver's Travels* is a *bildungsroman* in reverse; while Edmund learns the error of his ways, and does his best to correct them, Gulliver becomes more and more like his oppressors as his narrative progresses. Even when they are looking up at him (in Lilliput) they are in fact looking down on him, and even the horse-like Houyhnhnms of Book IV wish to use him as a tool in the extermination of what *they* believe to be his own kind.

Notions of the "noble savage" as well as the "savage noble" are extremely important to readings of both Gulliver's Travels and The Chronicles of Narnia. By Book IV, the significance of Gulliver's name has been fully developed, just as his self has disintegrated as a result of his gullibility. In Gulliver's Travels, the peoples Gulliver encounters are more often than not "savage nobles" in that they appear to be civilized on the surface, but actually aren't, unlike Gulliver, whom they believe to be a savage creature as a result of his size. Lewis also plays around with these dichotomies: Edmund is often described as being "beastly" because of his behavior towards Lucy in The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, while many of the animals are described as being noble.

These dichotomies are no doubt intended to complicate the notions of “nobility” and “savagery.” What does it really mean to be “savage,” and what does it really mean to be “noble?” Is it possible to be both? Neither Lewis nor Swift seems truly to think that this is the case. In The Last Battle, Lewis uses a discussion between Aslan and a young Taarkan who had been serving Tash (the Narnian equivalent to Satan) to make such a distinction between terms like noble and savage:

Not because he [Tash] and I are one, but because we are opposites. I take to me the services which thou hast done to him, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he knows it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted (Lewis 165).

According to Lewis, then, good and evil are exact opposites, just as nobility and savagery are. This notion is reinforced by the quotation from The Four Loves cited earlier: Lewis finds British Imperialism appalling because of the rhetoric employed: “We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch” (Lewis 49). If we read this quote alongside the previous one, it becomes clear that for Lewis, it is better to be a “savage” and act “nobly” than be a “noble” and act “savagely.” It doesn’t matter what names are attached to certain behaviors, because what is savage is savage and what is noble is noble. The notion of the “noble savage” came about as a way of justifying the

degradation of peoples who were in some way different, since difference equates to inferiority. Whether we are reading Gulliver's Travels or the Chronicles of Narnia, the implication is made that it is possible to be different without being savage. While animals in Narnia are prone to behavior typical of their species, there are also exceptions to the rule, which suggests that it is never ethical to treat the "other" based upon the other's physical appearance, which is what happens in Books I, II, and IV of Gulliver's Travels.

Of all The Chronicles of Narnia, The Silver Chair is probably the best illustration of the parallels between Swift and Lewis as Christian Humanists against imperialism. In The Silver Chair, two adolescent school children, Jill Pole and Eustace Scrubb, decide to go to Narnia in order to escape the "savagery" of the other children at their school, Experiment House. While in Narnia, Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle are captured by giants, and taken to the House of Harfang, where the Queen and King dote on the children because of their small size, in much the same way Gulliver is doted upon numerous times in Book II. However, the queen's reaction to the Marsh-wiggle is different: "The horrid thing! It's alive" (Lewis 96). Similarly, Gulliver says at the beginning of Book II that the farmer's wife "screamed and ran back as Women in England do at the Sight of a Toad or a Spider" (Swift, Travels 85). This is more than mere coincidence: not only is the reaction the same, but Lewis's narrator describes the Marsh-wiggle as looking "uncommonly like a large spider" (Lewis, Silver Chair 94), and the giant porter insists that Puddleglum the Marsh-wiggle looks like a frog. The King and Queen, then, double as parallels to the farmer and his wife as well as the King and Queen of Brobdingnag. Jill "submits to being kissed and pawed about by any number of

giantesses” in much the same way that Gulliver is objectified and “petted” by the giants in Book II, the scene with the “Maids of Honour” (Swift, Travels 111) being the most memorable.

Swift’s influence on Lewis reaches its peak in The Silver Chair when Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum realize that they are eating a talking stag: “The discovery didn’t have exactly the same effect on all of them...But Puddleglum, who was Narnian born, was sick and faint, and felt as you would feel if you found you had eaten a baby” (Lewis 112). Lewis is most likely making a reference to Swift’s *Modest Proposal* here, in which Swift ironically suggests that “instead of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives; they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding...of many thousands” (11-12). My hypothesis that Lewis employs a similarly sarcastic humor in The Silver Chair is further supported by the cookbook that Jill finds, with directions on how to prepare a human being and a Marsh-wiggle to be eaten, respectively:

**Man.** This elegant little biped has long been valued as a delicacy. It forms a traditional part of the Autumn Feast, and is served between the fish and the joint.  
**Marsh-wiggle.** Some authorities reject this animal altogether as unfit for giants’ consumption because of its stringy consistency and muddy flavour (114-115).

Note that Lewis parodies the traditional cookbook genre here, just as Swift satirizes the style of the expedition account throughout Gulliver’s Travels. The humor used here is problematic, but only to an extent: Jill certainly doesn’t think that it is funny,



just as Lewis doesn't seem to think that imperialism is funny. In a metaphorical sense, consumerism is representative of imperialism in the works of Swift and Lewis: the queen of the giants is described as being "dreadfully fat, with a double chin and a fat, powdery face, which isn't a very nice thing at the best of times, and of course looks much worse when it is ten times as big" (Lewis, Silver Chair 96). Once again, note Swift's influence:

That which gave me most uneasiness among these Maids of Honour, when my Nurse carried me to visit them, was to see them use me without any manner of Ceremony, like a Creature who had no sort of Consequence. For, they would strip themselves to the Skin, and put on their Smocks in my Presence, while I was placed on their Toilet directly before their naked Bodies, which, I am sure, to me was very far from being a tempting Sight, or from giving me any other emotions than those of Horror and Disgust. Their Skins appeared so coarse and uneven, so variously coloured when I saw them near, with a Mole here and there as broad as a Trencher, and Hairs hanging from it thicker than Packthreads; to say nothing further concerning the rest of their persons (Swift, Travels 111).

Lewis presents his own critique of the "lack of Ceremony appropriate to a Creature who had no sort of Consequence" in The Silver Chair. Upon discovering that they had eaten the Talking Stag, Puddleglum tells the children, "We've brought the anger of Aslan upon us...that's what comes of not attending to the signs. We're under a curse, I suspect. If it were allowed, it would be best thing we could do, to take these knives and drive them into our own hearts" (Lewis 112). While Lewis is certainly not a satirist to the same extent that Swift is, there is still something to be said about the way in which he treats the eating of the Talking Stag, as if it were some horrible sin against God: what does this say about the way Lewis feels regarding the way in which imperialism

consumes and destroys other cultures? Lewis has not only disoriented the reader by bringing the reader to a new place, but also disorients the reader's perception of the ethical. There is no doubt that the use of disorientation via inversion is a trope that Lewis has borrowed from Swift; if some of the parallels between Lewis and Swift's uses of this trope seemed explicit regarding Books I and II of Gulliver's Travels, then the same can be said of Book IV, and in the case of Book IV, the parallels are just as invaluable, if not more so.

In Book IV of Gulliver's Travels, *A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms*, the author goes to even greater lengths to disorient the reader than he did in Books I and II. The use of inversion in Book IV does not make use of the concept of size, but rather forces the reader to reconsider notions of "savage" and "noble" by way of the contrast of two distinctly different "races," the somewhat haughty Houyhnhnms and the detestable Yahoos. Swift's uses of satire, and more specifically, sarcasm, find their stride in Book IV. On first arriving in Houyhnhnm Land, Gulliver makes contact with the Yahoos, and reveals to the reader that "upon the whole, I never beheld in all my Travels so disagreeable an Animal, nor one against which I naturally conceived so strong an Antipathy" (Swift 207). In retrospect, this reflection should resonate on several levels: the Yahoos represent everything about humans that is detestable, but it is only through this lens of contact that Gulliver (as well as the reader) truly looks upon humans and human behavior as something abhorrent. The same effect is achieved in H.G. Wells' Time Machine, in which the protagonist George travels nearly one million years into the future. Wells' protagonist finds that humanity has split into two distinctly different races,

the innocent, bovine Eloi, and the ape-like, technologically savvy Morlocks, who provide for the Eloi and then turn around and slaughter them for food (Wells 57-58). There is no doubt that Wells was employing rhetoric very similar to Swift's: Gulliver is extremely offended that the Houyhnhnms view him as one of the Yahoos, even though they find him in a number of ways to be less disagreeable than the "true" Yahoos.

Gulliver's predicament in Travels is not unlike Oroonoko's situation in Aphra Behn's novella: according to Behn's narrator, "He had an extreme good and graceful mien and all the civility of a well-bred great man. He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his education had been in some European court" (Behn 15). By saying "he had nothing of barbarity in his nature," Behn's narrator sets Oroonoko apart from the other blacks; without explicitly stating that one would expect him to be barbaric, she is saying just that. Oroonoko is viewed by the Europeans in exactly the same way that Gulliver is viewed by the Houyhnhnms: Regarding his horse master, Gulliver reveals to the reader that

He was convinced (as he afterwards told me) that I must be a Yahoo, but my Teachableness, Civility, and Cleanliness astonished him; which were qualities altogether so opposite to those animals...My master was eager to learn from whence I came, how I acquired those Appearances of Reason, which I discovered in all my Actions, and to know my Story from my own Mouth (Swift, Travels 217).

This passage from *A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms* echoes the passage from Oroonoko quite distinctly. In both cases, the colonizer's gaze contains awe, but that

doesn't stop either colonizer from using the "noble savage" that he is viewing for his own purposes; Oroonoko loses his life, and gullible Gulliver, who actually believes that the Houyhnhnms have his best interest in mind, suffers from Houyhnhnm initiated self-deconstruction. By the end of Book IV, Gulliver not only detests the sight and smell of the Yahoos, but also the sights and smells of other true human beings. For Gulliver, the two are one and the same, and he has given himself over to the striving for Houyhnhmness. According to Richardson, "though they [the Yahoos] have some association with humanity in general, they reflect contemporary ideas of primitive, non-European humanity more closely than that, and their representation reproduces some ideas of Africans" (140).

The idea that colonization can be just as degrading to the colonizer as it is to the colonized can be derived from Gulliver's Travels as early as Book I, but Swift takes this idea much further in Book IV. It becomes clear that while seeing oneself through the eyes of the other *can* be eye-opening, it can also be extremely destructive. Gulliver simply accepts the ideology of his Houyhnhnm masters without question. In Reforming Empire, Christopher Hodgkins notes the irony that it is Gulliver, the "assimilated Yahoo, who in the end [is] actively exterminating Yahoos" (166). To say that the ideology of the Houyhnhnms anticipates Nazi rhetoric is, quite possibly, an understatement: the hierarchy established by the Houyhnhnms (which Gulliver adopts) is one very much based upon skin and hair coloration. The Yahoos are kept in kennels in very much the same way that the Jews were kept in concentration camps while Hitler was in power, and

Gulliver's use of Yahoo tallow and skins for his boat "eerily anticipate[s] Nazi lampshades" (166).

In The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, the White Witch is planning a genocide of her own in which she plans to exterminate the four "sons and daughters of Adam and Eve" simply because of a conflict of interest. One might think that after being treated less than well by so many different peoples on the basis of physical appearance, Gulliver would side with the pitiable Yahoos, who despite their many faults, are still unmistakably human, but paradoxically, it is their similarity to human-beings that makes them so expendable. Gulliver's willingness to aid the Houyhnhnms in the extermination of the Yahoos parallels his willingness to imitate Houyhnhnmness quite nicely; the fact that Gulliver comes from a country in which horses are mistreated as beasts of burden is a cause for question, if nothing else. Is Gulliver indeed trying to atone for something, to settle the score? In the end, he identifies himself as a Yahoo, and "when I [Gulliver] began to consider, it struck me with the utmost horror that by copulating with one of the Yahoo species I had become a Parent of more, it struck me with the utmost Shame, Confusion and Horror" (Swift, Travels 265). As a reader, one must ask whether or not Gulliver's motives and perceptions are noble or honorable on any level. It is as if Swift is suggesting that imperialism is fear-driven: "the Houyhnhnms display increasing symptoms of imperial anxiety—fear of insurrection, contempt for their inferiors' shiftlessness and ingratitude, revulsion at their filth—Gulliver feels compelled to prove his assimilation in more extreme ways" (Hodgkins 166). As far as the haughty Houyhnhnms and the Britons they represent are concerned, the only remedy to

imperialism seems to be more imperialism. The Houyhnhnms fear and hate the Yahoos because they suspect them of the same inhumanity that they know themselves to possess. The question then becomes, who is the reader intended to pity more, the Yahoos, who are apparently human but behave like beasts, or the Houyhnhnms, who are animals themselves but behave in a way that is disturbingly human?

In Book IV of Travels, Swift has brought the discussion of his contemporaries regarding notions of “savage” and “noble” (or civilized) up a notch. In Chapter IX the reader learns that Yahoos aren’t native to that country (Houyhnhnm Land), but rather “many Ages ago, two of these brutes appeared upon a mountain” (Swift 249). Even the creation story of the Yahoos, parodying the creation of Adam and Eve, is demeaning. “Whether produced by the Head of the Sun upon corrupted Mud and Slime, or from the Ooze and Froth of the Sea, was never known” (249). This explicit language signifies images of spontaneous generation; there is, significantly, no mention of a creator. European colonizers often used the “barbarous practices” of the native peoples they encountered as justification for the many ways in which they abused them, and there are traces of that behavior here. Due to a conflict of interest, the Houyhnhnms labeled the Yahoos pests and “made a general Hunting” (249). The narrator refers to the Yahoos in this section as a kind of savage bovine carnivore, which the Houyhnhnms “brought to such a degree of Tameness, as an Animal so savage by Nature can be capable of acquiring” (249). Swift poses an interesting question for the reader’s consideration: while the Yahoos represent much of what is detestable in human beings, is there really anything unethical about their behavior? The Yahoo agenda does make the existence of a

Houyhnhnm Utopia problematic—or does it? After all, it is by contrasting themselves with the Yahoos that the Houyhnhnms validate themselves. While Gulliver shuns his family on returning home because he now sees them the way the Houyhnhnms saw *him*, panics upon being approached sexually by an eleven year-old Yahoo, and actively exterminates Yahoos in order to win the approval of the Houyhnhnms and prove his allegiance, he never does anything to compromise his own well-being, nor does he ever suggest that he would be willing to make such a sacrifice. When approached by the girl Yahoo, Gulliver admits to the reader that “she did not make an Appearance altogether so hideous to the rest of her Kind” (244). This encounter, and the way in which the narrator relates it, is reminiscent of Raleigh’s treatment of the young girls in the Hakluyt accounts:

I neither know nor believe, that any of our company, by violence or otherwise, ever knew any of their women, and yet we saw many hundreds, and had many in our power, and of those very young, and excellently favoured, which came among us without deceit, stark naked (396).

Gulliver has a responsibility to his Houyhnhnm master, just as Raleigh had a responsibility to his queen. Clearly, imperialism is damaging to the colonizer because the colonizer is a tool at the disposal of the monarchy.

In Part I of Gulliver’s Travels, *A Voyage to Lilliput*, Swift uses Gulliver’s size relative to that of the Lilliputians as a means of setting Gulliver up as a kind of God/Christ parallel, much like Lewis does with Aslan in The Chronicles of Narnia. Upon

waking in Lilliput, Gulliver tells the reader that “I found my Arms and Legs were strongly fastened on each side to the Ground; and my Hair, which was long and thick, tied down in the same manner. I likewise felt several slender Ligatures across my body, from my Armpits to my Thighs” (Swift, Travels 23). The language used here reminds the reader of Christ bound and nailed to the cross, just as Gulliver’s size and the way he submits to and critiques the behavior of the Lilliputians in Part I is demonstrative of a kind of Godliness. In Lilliput, Gulliver is a kind of gentle giant, an alien who performs a number of “miracles” on account of his large size, several of which are not well received by the Lilliputians. Just as Christ was born into the Jewish nation, yet came for the salvation of all men, Gulliver becomes a citizen of Lilliput, but enrages the monarchy when he refuses to conquer Blefescu for petty reasons. In The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis presents the reader with the idea of love for one’s country, and his presentation of this idea is extremely useful when considering the responsibilities of a “Christian” to his/her neighbors, which Swift and Lewis both take into consideration on a global scale. Lewis says,

How can I love my home without coming to realize that other men, no less rightly, love theirs? Once you have realized that the Frenchmen like *café complet* just as we like bacon and eggs—why, good luck to them and let them have it. The last thing we want is to make everywhere else just like our home. It would not be home unless it were different (Lewis 42).

Lewis provides here what could be considered an adequate summation of Gulliver’s own feelings regarding Lilliput’s feelings towards Blefescu. If one assumes that Swift



intended for Lilliput and Blefescu to represent England and France, respectively, then both the content as well as the tone in which Lewis discusses that content seem to parallel Gulliver's own opinion regarding the Lilliputians: Gulliver speaks to the reader as a kind of representative of the Lilliputians, just as Lewis speaks as a representative for the English. Gulliver tells the reader of a fundamental Lilliputian Doctrine, that "*all true Believers shall break their Eggs at the convenient End*" (Swift, Travels 48). As a representative, Gulliver is willing to "defend his [the Emperor's] Person and State against all Invaders" (49); this is the kind of willingness that Lewis is talking about when he says that "patriotism of this kind is not in the least aggressive. It asks only to be let alone. It becomes militant only to protect what it loves" (Lewis, Four Loves 42). As I have said, Gulliver, even before given the title of *Nardac* for preventing an invasion of Lilliput (Swift, Travels 51), is willing to become militant in order to protect what he loves. As such, Lewis and Gulliver's (Swift's) view of patriotism are synonymous, as their respective passages show.

Early on in The Four Loves, Lewis makes it a point that even Christ "exhibits love for His country" (Lewis 40). Gulliver exhibits love for his country on several occasions, perhaps most notably when he defends Lilliput from Blefescu's naval fleet. In Lewis' own Chronicles of Narnia, Aslan shows up on several occasions in order to set things straight in Narnia, and in nearly every case this involves the assistance of "Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve," whether they are Narnian or English. Aslan's love for his own country, Narnia, manifests itself in the protection that he provides for it in times of need. It is not a stretch to say that Aslan's self-sacrifice in The Lion, The Witch and The

Wardrobe is not simply a means of salvation for Edmund, but a means of salvation for all of Narnia, in the sense that Edmund is one of four whose coming was prophesied; he is essential to Aslan's perfect plan. There is something Calvinistic about Lewis' rhetoric here, I think, but throughout The Chronicles of Narnia, Edmund is a successful "Christian" king because he has been humbled by the sacrifice that Aslan made for him. Lewis' problem with modern-day "Christendom" was its "specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery" (Four Loves 49). Lewis as a Christian Humanist and philosopher is a man of logic; much like the Professor Kirke from The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, who significantly, was another character humbled by Aslan's extension of forgiving grace, as well as a means of redemption. It is significant that Gulliver as well as the majority of the "warrior children" in The Chronicles are not born citizens, but rather aliens to the nations that they come to deliver. Similarly, Christ was an alien as well. Swift and Lewis both seem to be concerned with the notion that one does not have to be native to a country in order to love it selflessly, the way Christ loved.

In Gulliver's Travels, *A Voyage to Lilliput*, Gulliver makes it clear that he "might be a Match for the greatest armies they could bring against me, if they were all of the same size with him that I saw" (Swift 24). This is yet another piece of evidence supporting the claim that Gulliver is intended in Part I to be a kind of Christ-parallel. Just as Gulliver makes a conscious choice to entertain the Lilliputians with a wide array of "miracles" (for lack of a better word), Christ also could have called legions of angels from the skies to defend him from the Roman Soldiers who crucified him on the cross. Swift and Lewis as Christian Humanists are similar notably for their use of inversion—by

Part IV of Gulliver's Travels, A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver couldn't possibly be less like Christ. His love of country has become a god, manifested in the way Gulliver worships his Houyhnhnm master—and according to Lewis (re-stating a claim in The Four Loves that was originally made by M. Denis de Rougemont), “[Love] begins to be a demon the moment he begins to be a god” (17). Gulliver's love for the Houyhnhnms is a perverse, demonic love (Lewis would say) because of the way in which he becomes a prototypical Hitler, exterminating Yahoos as a symbolic means of attempting to exterminate the Yahoo in himself: “Hitler was haunted by the possibility of his own Jewish blood and insisted on being repeatedly tested” (Boothby 78). The commandment “love your neighbor as you love yourself” comes to mind, because it implies that one must love *oneself* in order to love one's neighbor. Gulliver's love for the Houyhnhnms becomes idolatry, just as Hitler's own idol was the purification of a race. Boothby attests to the fact that Hitler's hatred of the Jews was a self-hatred, and this is true in the case of Gulliver as well. He sees many similarities between himself and the Yahoos, and so his hatred of the Yahoos is a self-hatred: he hates himself because he is not a Houyhnhnm.

As lovers of country, the Gulliver of Part I and the Gulliver of Part IV are as different from one another as Christ is from Hitler. It must be noted that love of country becomes a demon when it moves from being a passive love to an active one, a defensive one to an offensive one, a humble one to a prideful one. The Gulliver of Part IV employs the aggression that the Gulliver of Part I shuns; instead of “only becoming militant to protect what one loves” (Lewis, Four Loves 42), Gulliver actively seeks out and destroys

the Yahoos in order to please the Houyhnhnms. Even as a parallel to Christ in Part I, Gulliver is an inversion of Christ in the sense that he is a burden to his country, consuming massive amounts of food, the consumption of which very likely could have caused a famine, whereas Christ fasted in the desert and used five fish and five loaves of bread to feed several thousand people. Lewis is also known for his use of inversion: while Aslan is a Christ parallel, he is not Christ. As a lion and a kind of conqueror (“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms” (Silver Chair 17), Aslan resembles God in the Old Testament as well as Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation. In the same way that Christ is often referred to as “the lion and the lamb,” Aslan’s submission to the White Witch makes him lamblike: before he is sacrificed, he is shaved:

Another roar of mean laughter went up from her followers as an ogre with a pair of shears came forward and squatted down near Aslan’s head. Snip-snip-snip went the shears and masses of curling gold began to fall to the ground. Then the ogre stood back and the children, watching from their hiding place, could see the face of Aslan looking all small and different without its mane. The enemies also saw the difference (The Lion 150).

As a lion, Aslan’s behavior is active, more often than not—here, his behavior is passive. He has submitted to the Witch and her followers in order to make the sacrifice for Narnia. Just as the lion is associated with actively pursuing its prey, the lamb is associated with passivity—living out its life in order to become the prey of a carnivorous animal, or be slaughtered on the altar as an offering. Typically, the shearing of wool is associated with

sheep—and there is no doubt that Lewis is making use of that association here. Looking “small and different,” Aslan has taken on the role of the lamb for the purpose of redeeming Edmund. In Part I of Gulliver’s Travels, Gulliver tells us that his hair “was long and thick” (Swift 23), and as a literary heir of Swift, it is no coincidence that Aslan’s own hair takes on such interpretative importance in The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe.

If Gulliver and Aslan are both important Christ parallels in Swift and Lewis’ respective narratives, then it can be assumed that both authors draw upon the story of Samson from the Old Testament as well. According to Wood, “Samson delivering the Jews from subjection [is for Scott-Craig] a type of Christ the redeemer, while [for Barbara Lewalski] the terrible judgment Samson visits on the Philistines typifies Christ in final apocalyptic judgment” (Wood 244). This observation is essential to my own argument: Swift and Lewis both draw on the Old and New Testament heroes of Samson and Christ, and this complicates the notion of the “ethical conqueror.” Chosen by God as a kind of conqueror himself, Samson’s strength is connected to his long hair; when it is cut, he temporarily loses access to that strength, just as Gulliver reveals to the reader that his “hair, which was long and thick, was tied down in the same manner” (Swift, Travels 23). Just as Gulliver knows that he could easily prevail against the largest armies of Lilliputians that could possibly come against him (24), Samson allows himself to be bound (Judges 15:13). Aslan’s statement that “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms” (Lewis, Silver Chair 17) is reminiscent of Samson’s own statement “With the jawbone of a donkey, Heaps upon

heaps, With the jawbone of a donkey I have slain a thousand men!" (Judges 15:16), and also reminiscent of Gulliver's statement that "I had reason to believe I might be a Match for the greatest Armies they could bring against me, if they were all of the same size with him that I saw" (Swift, Travels 24). Samson, Aslan, and the Gulliver of Book I are all parallels in the sense that they are all conquerors with a strong sense of morals, whose physical strength seems to be connected to long hair as well as physical appetite.

Samson, as a conqueror, has quite an appetite, both literal and sexual. Just as Samson's sexual appetite plays a role in his demise, Gulliver's own literal appetite is one reason that the Lilliputians want him exterminated. Gulliver, who consumes a large amount of meat and drink every day that he is in Lilliput, is much like Samson, whose strength seems to be connected to his strong sexual appetite. Samson and Gulliver both run into trouble as a result of these insatiable appetites. It is no coincidence that the idea to put out Gulliver's eyes is proposed: Swift seems to be drawing upon the story of Samson very explicitly in Part I of Travels:

That if his Majesty, in consideration of your Services, and pursuant to his own merciful Disposition, would please to spare your Life, and only give order to put out both your Eyes, he humbly conceived, that by this Expedient, Justice might in some measure be satisfied, and all the World would applaud the Lenity of the Emperor, as well as the fair and generous Proceedings of those who have the Honour to be his Counsellors. That the loss of your eyes would be no impediment to your bodily strength, by which you might still be useful to his Majesty. That Blindness is an addition to your Courage, by concealing dangers from us; that the Fear you had for your Eyes, was the greatest Difficulty in bringing over the Enemy's Fleet, and it would be sufficient for you to see by the Eyes of the Ministers, since the greatest Princes do no more (Swift 67).

It seems obvious that Swift thought the Old Testament character of Samson to be important when considering the implications of imperialism, as this passage shows. Samson's 'taste' in foreign women brings him a great deal of grief, even leading to his betrayal by Delilah, which results in his death after having had his eyes gouged out. Gulliver, in contrast, not only has a large physical appetite, but associates with the wife of one of his opponents at court on a personal basis, and this becomes one of the reasons that the Lilliputians mark him as a traitor. As a Christian Humanist, Swift would have been familiar with the story of Samson, and his own ideas regarding the strain put upon the conqueror by his conquest seem to have their roots in the Old Testament. After all, Samson is sent by God, who makes it clear via his angel that Samson is to be kept pure: "please be careful not to drink wine or any similar drink, and not to eat anything unclean" (Judges 13:4). How can Samson, or Gulliver, or any other "human" stay pure and be fit for such a purpose? Even Samson, who is literally sent by God, suffers hardships as a result of the very physical gifts that enable him to be a conqueror. In a sense, Samson and Gulliver, as a result of their humanity, are degenerates who fall further and further away from their Godlike purpose as their narratives unfold. Clearly there must be a solution to this problem. The solution, for authors like Lewis, is Christ, who too "exhibits love for his country" (Four Loves 40). Christ, unlike Samson and Gulliver, comes equipped to literally "conquer" the world without succumbing to temptation. It is no coincidence, then, that while Samson and Gulliver are conquerors who consume; Christ on the other hand fasts in the desert and only uses his power to produce food when it involves the

feeding of the multitudes. Christ's body even comes to be associated with nourishment as it is broken for the purpose of providing ever-lasting life. Hence, the qualities that are necessary in order to carry out the ultimate, ethical "conquest" are not present in Samson or Gulliver. They are, however, present in Aslan.

The stories of Samson and Christ are derived from a similar formula: God sends an angel to the mother-to-be in both cases, to let her know that she will bear a son who will be a king/conqueror/deliverer of his people. Gulliver, in a sense, is like a hybrid between the two Biblical characters: He prefers to use his size and strength for demonstration, in much the same way that Christ performed miracles. Both prefer nonviolent means of delivering their people. In The Four Loves, Lewis makes it a point that "the hero's death was not to be confused with the martyr's" (Lewis 48). This is significant: Samson cannot be considered a "martyr" in the truest sense, Lewis would agree, because of the hero mold, whereas Christ would be. In creating the character of Gulliver, Swift blurs the lines between "hero" and "martyr." Love of country, Lewis seems to think, cannot be taken too seriously in times of peace: "Our older patriotic songs cannot be sung without a twinkle in the eye" (48). Gulliver, as well as Samson to some degree, cannot be taken too seriously. They are both larger than life characters who suffer from a common ailment: their humanity.

C.S. Lewis is, indeed, a "literary heir" of Jonathan Swift—both are Christian Humanist authors out to prove how detestable the implications of British imperialism are. Swift achieves his satirical critique of imperialism via caustic means; the significance of his causticity is extremely relevant in both Gulliver's Travels and *A Modest Proposal*,



and while Lewis isn't nearly as caustic in The Chronicles of Narnia, other writings (like The Four Loves) attest to Lewis' own anger towards imperialism. As narrator, Gulliver apologizes at times for the crude nature of some of the episodes that take place in Travels, but by the end of the narrative, both the reader and the narrator have been disoriented to such a degree that it becomes clear that even this apology is intended to be ironic, since many of those interested in Gulliver's tale would have initially promoted the imperial thinking that he so caustically critiques. Lewis uses many of the same techniques employed by Swift, modeling his Chronicles after Gulliver's Travels both in form and content. Lewis and Swift both make use of the "multiple voyages" trope, and this essay has already included a number of parallels between the content of Gulliver's Travels and The Chronicles. Both writers are extremely aware of just how effective the mirror trick is: Brobdingnag, Houyhnhnm Land, and Narnia are parallels to our own world, right down to the last detail.

While Swift's *bildungsroman* in reverse seems to suggest that imperialism in itself as a monster is capable of consuming a good man, only to regurgitate him as a bad one, Lewis seems to take solace in the notion that good will prevail over evil, regardless of how consuming that evil may appear. Despite this difference between their ideologies, which must be noted, Lewis' protagonists often regress back into children in The Chronicles of Narnia, which is reminiscent of Swift's own treatment of Gulliver in Travels. In writing The Chronicles, Lewis is trying to turn children against imperialistic ideology before it is too late—he appeals to the child's sense of honor and humanity's responsibility to protect and serve rather than raid and loot. Lewis makes use of a number

of prepubescent characters, both human and Narnian, in whom “goodness” is inherent (though none of them is faultless); his narratives suggest that there is a sense of wonder that should result from the encounter with the other, rather than a need to conquer. Even Lewis’ pagan “savages” (like the Tarkaan from The Last Battle) are capable of doing good in the Christian sense, explicitly suggesting that respective notions of “good” and “evil” are not relative, but rather universal. Good and evil, for Swift and Lewis, are black and white and there are no grey areas. To use Christianity as a justification for conquest while “enacting the service of Moloch” (Four Loves, 49) becomes a problem, and it was for this reason that Swift detested imperialism and that Lewis thought that patriotism should only act violently in order to protect what it loves. As important Biblical figures, Christ and Samson both prove invaluable when reading Gulliver’s Travels and The Chronicles of Narnia. As Christian Humanists, Swift and Lewis draw on both of them for literary inspiration—especially since the two are parallels in the sense that they are conquerors sent by God for the purpose of conquering—and yet, they present significantly different images of “conqueror.”

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INFILTRATING THE CANON: THE RECREATION OF THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* IN  
SANDRA CISNEROS' THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

In a world in which white males have attempted—and up until very recently succeeded—in dominating the literary canon, Sandra Cisneros is an unlikely figure, simply because she is neither white nor male. Cisneros is “nobody’s mother and nobody’s wife,” according to the biographical information in the Vintage International edition of The House on Mango Street. Like her protagonist, Esperanza, Cisneros has found other outlets as a nurturer, primarily as a writer and as an educator and mentor. In this essay, I will argue that Cisneros’ appeal is universal because of the ways in which she 1) relies upon the *bildungsroman* tradition, 2) utilizes the notion of the “self-made man” (or woman, in Esperanza’s case), and 3) creates parallels to Biblical discourse. She uses these strategies to critique notions of success in America as well as the ideology of patriarchy. In order to appreciate the significance of The House on Mango Street, one must consider the ways in which Cisneros uses these strategies to her advantage, demanding that her reader question the parameters within which a woman is expected to operate according to American ideology and the patriarchy. Cisneros has also recreated the implications of genre by combining prose and poetry, mediums, which makes her work all the more accessible. The House on Mango Street is a good “novel” (for lack of a better word) because of its accessibility, which exists on a universal as well as a more specific cultural level.

Early in the narrative, Cisneros' protagonist, who is in most ways a mirror image of the author herself, reveals that in English, her name means "hope" (Cisneros 10). "In Spanish, it means too many letters." She tells the reader that she would like to be baptized under a new name—which seems ironic, since Cisneros the author has already re-christened herself in the sense that "Esperanza" is a representation of herself on so many levels. The renaming of the protagonist by him or herself is a conventional *bildungsroman* technique, dating back at least as far as Dickens (Great Expectations). In her essay on the crossing of borders, both literally and metaphorically, Stella Bolaki argues that the "formation of selfhood, [which is] a central thematic concern of the *bildungsroman* (also known as the novel of development), is defined for ethnic Americans by a constant *negotiation* of belonging in distinct territories, in other words a kind of border crossing" (Bolaki 1, emphasis added). Bolaki's reading of Cisneros' use of the *bildungsroman* points to the significance of Cisneros' use of dichotomy. Bolaki also reconciles the way in which Cisneros "crosses borders" between English and Spanish, as well as poetry and prose, throughout her narrative (5). Bolaki's essay provides a helpful assessment of the importance of "border crossing" as well as the reconsidering of the *bildungsroman* tradition. I will extend this assessment into a consideration of Esperanza as a Christ figure, since Esperanza is most like Christ in the way in which she must learn to negotiate the distinctly different territories to which she belongs, as Christ did, as a

result of being “man” and also “God”).<sup>1</sup> Although Cisneros’ aesthetic strategies overlap and intertwine, I will focus on her use of the *bildungsroman* traditions, which includes her use of the notion of the “self-made man/woman,” as well as her use of Christ as a model for the character of Esperanza.

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<sup>1</sup> As a member of a Catholic family, Cisneros has clearly been influenced by Christian ideology, but the parallels between Esperanza and Christ, though mentioned in literary criticism, appear only sketchily in most criticism about The House on Mango Street. One of my goals in this essay is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Esperanza is like Christ—the “savior” of Mango Street, an heir to a tradition of strong women: her “coming” is prophesied in the text. However, the text is clearly not an evangelical one—as a text that makes use of the *bildungsroman* tradition, Christianity is more of a literary trope than anything else for Cisneros though nonetheless a very important one. While the Christian influence in the text should not be understated, it should also be clear that it is not Cisneros’ goal to “convert” her reader, but rather, to use Biblical discourse as a kind of lens through which one might assess Esperanza’s life; Christian ideology enriches and complicates her text.

## I. BORDER CROSSING AND DICHOTOMIES

In The House on Mango Street, the Mexican-American protagonist must come to terms with herself as both an individual and a member of a community. To play both of these roles simultaneously is to inhabit a kind of ideological borderland. The sense of community maintained and questioned in House suggests that the “crossing of borders” complicates the more traditional, European *bildungsroman*, as well as the notion of the “self-made man/woman.” In Borderlands, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that “Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them” (38). As “nobody’s mother and nobody’s wife,” Cisneros clearly critiques male power. Anzaldúa presents concrete ideas in her own text which act as a lens through which Cisneros’ narrative can be better understood.

The name “Esperanza” is significant and symbolic because it was her grandmother’s—a woman who, like the protagonist, was strong-willed, born in the Chinese year of the horse. She lets us in on a little secret, confiding that “The Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (10). She reveals that being a horse woman did her grandmother no good; she was carried off by the grandfather “as if she were a fancy chandelier” (11). The use of this simile more or less explicitly presents a critique of the patriarchal notion that “woman” is mere property, something that can be



owned and tamed. The notion of being like a horse is also important, since the horse is an animal that likes to be wild and free, and yet has been tamed to be one of the most important domestic work animals. She goes on to say, “I do not want to inherit her place by the window” (Cisneros 11). Esperanza rejects the role of woman assigned to her by her culture, the role that her grandmother tried and failed to escape. Like *Mango Street* itself, her heritage is a combination of harsh realities and harsh beauty.

Since the notion of “hope” has positive *and* negative implications, it represents a kind of borderland itself. Esperanza has nowhere to go but *up* in the world; but in the meantime, she longs for escape. The name’s negative implications result from its Spanish resonances: “It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color” (10). Esperanza’s name carries positive connotations in English; however, when Esperanza says, “In English my name means hope,” Cisneros suggests the fluidity of her identity—“hope” can mean different things—what, for America, is hope? “My Name” seems to respond to this question. In the meantime, it is almost as if the “crossing of borders” has complicated the very implications of the protagonist’s name.

Dichotomy is an extremely important theme in Cisneros’ narrative. The act of border crossing has contributed to this dichotomy, and the hybridization of Mexican and American culture in Esperanza’s community also complicates the narrative. For example, in the first vignette, Esperanza reveals that “the house on Mango Street is ours, and we don’t have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn’t a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom. But even so, it’s not the house we’d thought we’d get” (3-4). The phrase “but

even so” is extremely important: all of the reasons to be satisfied with the house seem to be canceled out by the fact that it is not the house they’d been hoping it would be; in America, once one accomplishes a goal or attains something, that thing is no longer desirable/good enough. The tone used throughout the narrative itself is a “hopeful” one in and of itself, in that notions of “America” as a larger setting for the novel carry with them so much to be desired. In America, one is expected to want what everyone else has, and not having as much as/more than others makes dissatisfaction mandatory. Paradoxically, the text works very hard to critique notions of American selfishness, but also celebrates them in the sense that they are worked into the text in such a way as to enrich it.

“Hope” is the middle-ground between dissatisfaction and satisfaction; it is neither negative nor positive, and yet it is both. It is dichotomous, having different implications in English and Spanish, in America and Mexico. Like the novel itself, which is neither prose nor poetry, it represents a unique amalgam of the two. The importance of balance and dichotomy doesn’t stop here, but even extends into the realm of gender. In the vignette titled “Boys and Girls,” the narrator reveals that “The boys live in their universe and we live in ours” (8). In the next line, the author suggests that gender lines are further complicated by immaturity: “they’ve got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can’t be seen talking to girls.” Once again, the narrative presents the reader with juxtaposition and dichotomy: inside and outside the house are two different worlds, just as Mexico and America are two different worlds. The *protagonist* is unaware of the fact that, in many ways, children operate within a sphere that mimics the one in which their parents operate, but the *author* is extremely aware of this fact.

In much the same way that gender creates a border that can only be crossed within the sphere of the home, Esperanza feels unable to relate to her sister, Nenny. In some ways, Nenny is the personification of Esperanza's heritage: something awkward that follows her around, something she doesn't like and isn't proud of, but nonetheless has to put up with, protect, and love: "Nenny is too young to be my friend. She's just my sister and that was not my fault. You don't pick your sisters, you just get them and sometimes they come like Nenny...And since she comes right after me, she is my responsibility" (8). This vignette reinforces the American theme of dissatisfaction, always wanting what one doesn't have. Esperanza wants a best friend all her own, "one who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them." The vignette closes with Esperanza's comparison between herself and a red balloon tied to an anchor, an image that speaks explicitly to the theme of hope as a sort of neutral ground, where one is preparing oneself to break free of restraints. Later on, in the vignette titled *Laughter*, Rachel and Lucy, two of Esperanza's "friends," look at her as if she is crazy because she says that a house they passed looked like the houses in Mexico. Nenny comes to her defense, saying, "Yes, that's Mexico all right. That's what I was thinking exactly" (18). It's ironic that the vignette ends with Nenny defending Esperanza, since the vignette is about Esperanza's negative feelings toward her. In The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis says that "there is love of home, of the place where we grew up in or the places, perhaps many, which have been our homes; and of all the places near these and fairly *like* them, love of old acquaintances, of familiar sights, sounds and smells" (41). Esperanza's love for Nenny is

like her love of Mexico—she feels a responsibility to both family and culture because of their familiarity, their dual status as “homes.”

In order to flesh out the dichotomies she creates and explore the ramifications of border crossing, Cisneros presents several foils in the narrative, such as Marin and Sally, who both plan to use their bodies as commodities in order to move up in the world, and are exploited by the men they encounter as a result. The use of the foil is very important in the *bildungsroman*. First, Cisneros introduces Esperanza’s grandmother, who is more an idea than an actual character, like the concept of hope itself. Her placement in the narrative sets the stage for the playing out of certain ideas and themes, such as the theme of feminine strength. Female characters like Marin are also essential foils for Esperanza. Marin’s primary importance stems from her desire for a fairy-tale happy ending, a lie that the different forms of the American media has told her:

Marin says that if she stays here next year, she’s going to get a real job downtown because that’s where the *best* jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live a *big* house far away (26, emphasis added).

Yet another example of a character concerned with border crossing, Marin inhabits a borderland in that she is trying very hard to grow up fast and get married so that she can make what she thinks will be a better life; Marin is yet another example of a character concerned with border crossing. Marin is representative of a very distinct category of foreign women, who can’t be expected to make good choices (as a result of a lack of

education): “What *matters*, Marin says, is for the boys to see us and for us to see them” (27, emphasis added). Her hopes and dreams are vague and amorphous. It is no wonder that the naïve prepubescent protagonist looks up to her. She smokes cigarettes, wears short skirts, has pretty eyes, and “the boys who pass by her say *stupid* things like I am in love with those two green apples you call eyes, give them to me why don’t you. And Marin just looks at them without even blinking and is not afraid” (27, emphasis added). The author encourages the reader to partake of Marin’s appeal. Marin’s appeal differs from reader to reader, dependent upon the reader’s gender, but rhetorical moves have been made so that “Marin” and the ideas that she represents aren’t offensive to either the implied male or female reader. That is, there is something charming about Marin, despite the misconceptions that she has with respect to America. There is even something charming about the hoped for fairy-tale ending in and of itself, even if it doesn’t turn out to be as happy of an ending as girls like Marin expect it to be.

However, Marin is an empty shell in many ways—her amorphous hopes and dreams leave a lot to be desired, and hence Cisneros asks that she be pitied: “Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is *waiting* for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (Cisneros 27). The word “waiting” is especially significant here when one considers that Esperanza’s very name means waiting (in English), and that she desires to change it. It isn’t difficult to see Marin’s significance as a foil to Esperanza, who doesn’t like waiting; she prefers to *make* things happen. Cisneros isn’t suggesting that Marin’s gender is responsible for the fact

that she is so empty-headed; in fact, the narrative seems to suggest that “America” has complicated notions of selfhood and success for the immigrant, regardless of gender.

Another dichotomous character is Darius, who “doesn’t like school, who is mostly stupid and mostly a fool” (33), yet Esperanza sees him as being wise when he says that God is a cloud. Darius is unaware of the implications of what he says (after all, he *is* a fool for the most part). Cisneros uses Darius in much the same way she uses Marin: both characters are, for the most part, foolish, and Cisneros uses them to critique America’s influence on the young Latino. In America, “God” is more amorphous, like a cloud. Just as clouds are what the viewer wants them to be, America is a country where individualism is valued, and everyone is entitled to his own idea of who/what constitutes “God.” In mainstream ideology, “God” is fat and white, and these words carry with them certain implications: for the most part, power is held by those who are white in America. The word “fat” suggests excess, which represents the American Dream. The language that Cisneros uses in this section of the narrative, which is remarkably short, speaks volumes regarding the way(s) in which Cisneros presents a critique of white America without offending her “white” reader, because the white reader is a victim of the dog-eat-dog ideology of America as well. The *bildungsroman* also re-emerges here for critique. Cisneros sets up the narrative in such a way that her readers, white or Hispanic, are forced to reevaluate the concept of the “self-made man” and its implications. Darius is just a fool—but in America, he has the opportunity to redefine God if he so wishes. Darius has the opportunity to remake himself in the sense that he becomes a kind of guru for the other children, passing off knowledge to them. Cisneros is aware of Darius’ lack

of authority, but Esperanza isn't—she thinks he's wise, because his statement carries so much weight for her; it is poetic and insightful, and Esperanza can relate.

Old Lady Vargas appears in the narrative not long after the introduction of Marin. Rosa Vargas, like Marin, is archetypal. Like the Lady Madonna character from the Beatles song on the *Hey Jude* Album (1968), “Rosa Vargas’ kids are too many and too much. It’s not her fault, you know, except she is their mother and only one against many” (29). Like the Beatles song, the vignette in House that hones in on Old Lady Vargas has a rhetorical setting that is strangely funny and sad at the same time (another dichotomy). Cisneros is playing off of a humorous old rhyme: “there was an old woman who lived in a shoe, she had so many children that she didn’t know what to do.” It is sad, on the other hand, because the children are draining the life out of their poor mother. The writer highlights the question of “responsibility” here as elsewhere; one must wonder if her husband would have abandoned her back in Mexico, without notions of the “self-made man” buzzing around in his head. In this way, Cisneros communicates the idea that “crossing borders” can have severe implications: She “cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come” (29).

Readers feel empathy regarding foils like Marin and Rosa, who both represent worst-case scenarios. Once again, Cisneros has created a strange dichotomy, since “America” frowns on the very problems that result from the idealistic notions that fuel its inhabitants. The use of second person in this vignette suggests that Esperanza, like the reader, has moved away from the notion that the entire community is responsible for the welfare of the children within it. Esperanza addresses the reader in the second person,

saying, “but after awhile, you get tired of being worried about kids who aren’t even yours” (30). When she says “you,” she means, “I,” and it is clear that the idea in many second and third world countries that “it takes a village to raise a child” has been lost in America, where looking out for “number one” is essential to being successful. Stories like Rosa’s suggest that “whiteness” and its ideals are contagious; the Latino who crosses borders tends to buy into some of the empty, unfulfilling notions that America celebrates.

In “Alicia Who Sees Mice,” Cisneros presents a foil to Rosa Vargas, fleshing out the dichotomy of the self-made man/self-made woman. Alicia, who is yet another important female character, is “young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn’t want to spend her life in a factory or behind a rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night...is afraid of nothing...except...fathers” (31-32). The striking efficiency that Cisneros achieves in this vignette is very similar to that which she achieves in the following vignette about Darius. Alicia is afraid of mice, and Darius, who is mostly a fool, chases girls with firecrackers or a stick that *touched a rat* (33, emphasis added). The repulsion to rodents and the diseases they carry is only one example of the way in which Cisneros efficiently takes an idea and makes it universal. It is also an example of the way in which she uses dichotomy with respect to gender— the rodent example is only one of many regarding the different ways in which boys and girls/men and women are expected by their culture to behave. Cisneros raises the stakes when she moves from discussing fear of rodents and the diseases that they carry to the struggle for control over female agency and the female body.



## II. LATINO MEN AND THE PATRIARCHY

Whereas the story of Alicia makes implicit reference to Cinderella, “The Family of Little Feet” makes reference to Cinderella explicitly when the girls are trying on shoes. Esperanza’s reference is meant to be innocent, but leads to the following conversation with Mr. Benny:

Your mother know you got shoes like that? Who give you those?  
 Nobody.  
 Them are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that.  
 Take them shoes off before I call the cops, but we just run (41).

Once again, Cisneros’ short scene speaks volumes about patriarchy. If hands play an important social and cultural roles in creating thematic focus in Dickens’ narrative, than “feet” play the same role in *Cisneros*’ narrative: she simply turns the patriarchal literary tradition upside down. At first it seems as if Mr. Benny is just a crabby old man, out to ruin the girls’ fun, but when they come in contact with a bum man who offers them a dollar for kisses, they decide that “we are tired of being beautiful” (42), as if beauty is something that can be turned on and off, a commodity that can be bought. Like many of the male characters in Cisneros’ narrative, the bum man is interested in female exploitation, an important theme in The House on Mango Street.

Cisneros employs humor very usefully in this vignette—Mr. Benny as a *store owner* seems to have bought into the American notion that women’s bodies, like everything else, are a commodity meant to be regulated by men. It is almost as if he is suggesting that the girls have no right to decide what kinds of shoes to wear, because of the implications of such shoes (“They are dangerous”). According to Michelle Sugiyama, “Cisneros’ use of the foot/shoe motif sheds light on male manipulation of female sexuality and thus on the design and operation of the human mind” (Sugiyama 9). The shoes are dangerous because they suggest awareness on the girls’ part of what constitutes sexual attraction. “They are dangerous” because “them” generate power; the awareness of one’s own feminine sexual power as threatening to patriarchy is a theme that Cisneros addresses here.

However, Cisneros gives a nuanced critique of patriarchy in American and Latino culture: not all the men in the narrative are “bad,” if one is thinking in terms of absolutes. The use of two primary types of men suggests that for Cisneros, the line that defines the ways in which a man should behave and the ways in which he shouldn’t is anything but a fine one. In “Papa Who Wakes up Tired in the Dark,” the narrator tells the reader that after her father learns of his own father’s death, he “crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries. I have never seen my Papa cry and don’t know what to do” (Cisneros 56).<sup>2</sup> In the novel, Esperanza’s father has clearly had to be very tough, as the family struggled with living in America. The narrator reveals that “Because I am the oldest, my

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<sup>2</sup> Cisneros’ own father was Mexican, whereas her mother was Mexican-American.

father has told me first, and it is my turn to tell the others. I will have to explain why we can't play. I will have to tell them to be quiet today" (56-57). Although the oldest, she is also a girl and the respect that her father has extended to her seems to have played a role in developing her own opinion of him. The vignette ends, "And I think if my own Papa died what would I do. I hold my Papa in my arms. I hold and hold and hold him" (57). Esperanza needs her father: he is a "good" man, a family man, a man who has not gone sour as a result of living in America.

The vignette entitled "Chanclas" introduces the reader to Uncle Nacho, who provides another positive image of masculinity. He pulls Esperanza out onto the dance floor at the party following her little cousin's baptism. Esperanza doesn't want to dance, but Uncle Nacho's aggressiveness is somehow legitimized by the specificity of his role in her life, as well as the family dynamic that has been set up, both culturally and universally. When Esperanza says "my uncle who is a liar says, You are the prettiest girl here" (Cisneros 47), the writer underscores Uncle Nacho's innocence, and indicates that the young Esperanza is also aware that everyone needs an uncle like Nacho, regardless of race, class, or gender. Uncle Nacho is meant to be read on a more universal level, whereas the narrator's father can be read on a more specific cultural level. Nevertheless, they are both important characters because they provide positive representations of masculinity, especially within the vulnerable Latino family dynamic. Esperanza says, "All I hear is the clapping when the music stops" (48), celebrating Uncle Nacho's positive role in her transition from girlhood to womanhood.

Esperanza hadn't wanted to dance with her "cousin by first communion or something" (47), and it is interesting that the vignette "Chanclas" ends with, "All night the boy who is a man watches me dance. He *watched* me dance" (Cisneros 48, emphasis added). This line is somewhat ambiguous—to whom is she referring? Is the protagonist Esperanza referring to Uncle Nacho, or her cousin? The language here is so general that she could be talking about either. She has already set up Uncle Nacho as the good uncle/older brother figure, and since a better way to describe him would be "the man who is a boy," the reader can probably assume that she isn't talking about him. Also, because of the way she subtly refers to what could possibly be a sexual gaze ("He *watched* me dance" (48, emphasis added)), it's safe to assume that she isn't talking about Uncle Nacho, because that would contradict the image she has already painted of him as innocent and sexless, the way uncles are *supposed* to be (respecting children). At this point in the narrative, it is possible to read Cisneros as having purposefully blurred the edges in order to encourage the reader into questioning male roles.

There are plenty of men in the narrative who don't measure up to the standard set by the narrator's father; several fail miserably. Like the bum man, the "older Oriental" (Cisneros 58) man in "The First Job" seems somewhat pitiful, like a rabid animal. According to the narrator, when he asks her for a birthday kiss, she reveals, "I thought I would *because he was so old* and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and *doesn't let go*" (Cisneros 55, emphasis added). Cisneros ends the vignette here, leaving it open to the reader's interpretation. She recounts the experience almost as if it were simply something to be

expected as a young girl having made herself vulnerable “saying I was one year older” and wearing “the navy blue dress that made me look older” (Cisneros 54). As a struggling individual who is part of a struggling family that is part of a larger community that is still struggling for the most part in the U.S. today, the narrator’s actions are justifiable, if not unavoidable. What makes the Oriental man’s behavior worse is that he seems to be aware of the fact that she needs the job and has worn the dress to appear older, and takes advantage of his knowledge that she probably won’t tell anyone since it could jeopardize her position there. Esperanza seems to feel sorry for him: “I thought I would because he was so old” (55) and the reader initially feels sorry for him as well, since the best he can do is deceive an underage girl. She had been meaning to give him a kiss, but he gives her one, ultimately making the interchange an aggressive one on his part and a passive one on hers. This vignette speaks volumes, suggesting that the male immigrant must compromise his masculinity as a result of crossing borders, and “play the game” in America, and what little power he does wield is embarrassingly small. Esperanza is embarrassed for him, and the reader is, too.

In “No Speak English,” the narrative introduces us to another type of man. He isn’t named, which is significant. “Mamacita is the big mama of *the man* across the street, third-floor front. Rachel says her name ought to be *Mamasota*, but I think that’s mean” (Cisneros 76, emphasis added). The man is unnamed because he could be any Latino man come to remake himself and find his fortune at the expense of his heritage, whereas Mamacita personifies that rich, vibrant culture that has had to be compromised in order for “the man” to make it in America. “Out stepped the tiny shoe, a foot soft as

rabbit's ear, then the thick ankle, a flutter of hips, fuchsia roses and green perfume" (76). "Mamacita" is the only woman described as being corpulent in the narrative and yet attractive. Once again, "feet" take on a sexual connotation in Cisneros' novel. A woman with such small feet would be considered a luxury in some cultures because of her inability to work. Given her man's predicament, Mamacita, like the rich culture she represents, must be compromised. Cisneros couldn't make Mamacita's significance as a caricature/symbol more explicit. When "the man" becomes disgusted with her, it is because he wants the best of both worlds, and her heart is clearly still in Mexico. "No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in a language that sounds like tin" (78). Esperanza has already told the reader that English sounds as if it "were made of tin and hurts the roof of your mouth" (11), and "No Speak English" reinforces the idea that Hispanic cultures are in some ways far richer than Anglo-Saxon cultures. Once again, Cisneros' precision and brevity are essential, and yet the issue she presents is a complex one. Who is to be blamed for the problems of the marriage? The husband, who wants her to cut the "only skinny thread that kept her alive" (78), or the wife, who is unappreciative of how hard he has had to work in order to provide them with a better life? These two characters are essential to the novel's thematic focus regarding how men should and shouldn't behave, since the man's predicament leaves little room for choice; he has made his bed and must sleep in it. In this way, he is a contrast to both "good" and "bad" male characters in the narrative; he falls somewhere in between. While the notion of the self-made man is one element of the *bildungsroman*, it isn't the only one. Mamacita's man is an important foil to Esperanza, who refuses to compromise her culture. Esperanza also

develops over the course of House into the kind of young woman who wants to better herself for the purpose of helping others.

### III. THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* AND CHRIST PARALLELS

As the “hope” of Mango Street, Esperanza emerges in a series of vignettes as a Christ figure. Throughout this text, Cisneros uses the notion of the self-made man as well as parallels between Christ and her protagonist, as elements of the *bildungsroman* motif in order to create meaning. “*Bildungsroman*” literally means formation novel, and The House on Mango Street is the story of Esperanza’s coming into her own power as a young female writer. The notion of the “self-made man” is also extremely important to the creation of meaning in Cisneros’ text. She builds on this idea and reconfigures it in order to create meaning. In doing so, she creates a working definition regarding what it means to be a self-made *woman*. Christ as a historic and literary figure was the quintessential “self-made man” in that he proclaimed himself to be the son of God, and therefore God. However, just as Cisneros defies the traditional notion of the “self-made man” in order to create the notion of the self-made *woman*, she also challenges the traditional implications surrounding the Christ paradigm. According to Julian Olivares,

Her surname, [Cordero], meaning “lamb,” operates symbolically in the text... She refuses to sacrifice her gender to patriarchic society... Esperanza depicts the lonely and the imprisoned, the physically and psychologically abused Latinas; and in this way she displays her collective identity to fit into her name, Esperanza also undertakes a personal quest to liberate herself from the gender constraints of her culture (213).



Olivares would agree that the use of the surname “Cordero,” which in Spanish literally translates to “lamb,” justifies the assertion that the Esperanza character is partially modeled on Christ. Cisneros complicates traditional implications surrounding the Christ model, however, by *refusing* to sacrifice. Like Christ, who came into the world as a Jew in order to establish a new “way out” for those who would follow Him, Esperanza also comes into the world destined to defy its expectations of her as “non-white, poor, and female” (Kuribayashi 165). Mango Street itself, then, is like the stable in which Christ was born: “it’s not the house we thought we’d get” (Cisneros 3). The similarity between the words “mango” and “manger” is also noteworthy. Her desire to “baptize myself under a new name” (11) is doubly significant: on one hand, it implies Christ-like agency, on the other hand, it alludes to the traditional *bildungsroman* as well as the traditional American notion of the self-made man. A famous parallel is the protagonist of Dickens’ novel Great Expectations: “My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Phillip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip” (Dickens 3). The similarity between Pip and Esperanza’s voices is worth noting, as well as the similar situations respecting their names: Esperanza tells the reader that “At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth” (Cisneros 11).

Unlike the story of Jesus, Cisneros’ text is concerned with power that emanates from a feminine source, a power that many of the male agents in the text treat like a wild animal, something to be feared unless it can be harnessed. We have seen how in “My Name,” the reader learns that Esperanza inherited her name from her great-grandmother,

who was also “a horse woman” (Cisneros 10). Surrounding the horse are implications of power, power that must be tamed in order to be utilized, power that is dangerous otherwise. Throughout Cisneros’ narrative, the reader is presented with numerous examples of women who are “utilized,” for lack of a better word, by their husbands and fathers, treated like beasts of burden who must contribute to their families in order to meet the demands that their native culture as well as the American culture puts on them. Esperanza is not only the hope of Mango Street; she is the hope of an entire cultural body of women who have either grown up Hispanic in the United States, or have been displaced to the United States from countries in Central and South America. Esperanza discovers the joy of writing at a young age, a joy that will “keep her free” (Cisneros 61). Through this medium that she discovers that she is not only capable of providing an escape for herself, but an escape for others like her who cannot do it on their own. For this reason, she is like Christ, having the means necessary to provide such an escape for those around her who are suffering and cannot save themselves.

The pain that Esperanza suffers as a result of her being “non-white, poor, and female” (Kuribayashi 165) is shared with other female characters in the text to different extents. What sets her apart from them is her writing: she contains a “power” that they do not, a power that will enable her to provide such an escape for herself and for those who cannot out” (Cisneros 110). Like Christ, who was able to save mankind by being a man and also God at the same time, Esperanza is able to provide such an escape because she leaves to return—she has put down roots and drawn inspiration from the very forces that oppress her.

In “Four Skinny Trees,” Cisneros suggests that self-awareness is something that has to be developed and refined. The development of self-awareness is important to the *bildungsroman* tradition, and the trees are models for Esperanza. This vignette explores the importance of “putting down roots” for the purpose of survival, even if the soil provided leaves a lot to be desired. “Anger” is an emotion often attached to femininity by patriarchal society in order to devalue women and create the illusion that they are an “inferior” order of beings. “Four Skinny Trees” challenges this notion, and suggests that sometimes anger is essential for survival: “They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep” (74). It is important to consider this vignette with earlier “American” women writers in mind, which requires that the reader take the significance of the domestic sphere into consideration. The domestic sphere may leave a lot to be desired, but it still meets a woman’s need to be a nurturer and have self-worth. The four skinny trees are like housewives, who see their own pathetic reflections in one another, but simply keep on keeping on. Their anger is a kind of fuel in itself.

The four skinny trees in the vignette “Four Skinny Trees” may also allude to the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Cisneros’ protagonist opens the vignette with the sentence “They are the only ones who understand me” (Cisneros 74). Since the four gospels are all consistent with one another and complement one another, it is appropriate to use them as a lens to read “Four Skinny Trees.” In one sentence, Esperanza tells us that “they teach,” an especially explicit reference to the four gospels,

which were written for the purpose of teaching the implied reader about the life of Christ. When Esperanza tells the reader that the trees “grew despite concrete,” she is alluding to the parable of the mustard seed: some of the seed fell on unsuitable ground, but still flourished. While Christ told that parable with the purpose of emphasizing the importance of fertile ground, the parable also works in such a way as to suggest that even ground that isn’t extremely fertile produces something.

Regarding the Christian theme of hope, the concept of fertility is very important to House. Esperanza, like the trees, has been given ground of her own that would not on a first glance appear fertile in an artistic sense: she is poor, nonwhite, and female. Accordingly, her accomplishments are all the more noteworthy. The New Testament presents its reader with a number of characters who seem “infertile,” but Christ is able to use these characters because they have nothing to lose, and as a result are more likely to leave everything and follow Him: “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). Cisneros’ text borrows from the Bible the idea that less is more when it comes to hope: those who have forget those who need, and so in some ways, it is better to be nonwhite, poor, and female. The words “skinny” and “hairy” used in this particular vignette can be associated with medieval asceticism: during medieval times, the Christian ascetic fasted as a means of purging/self-flagellation, and also wore a “hair shirt” that caused itching. “This is how they keep,” the narrator/protagonist affirms, implying that the trees have chosen this life for themselves, like the life of the medieval Christian ascetic.

If “Four Skinny Trees” establishes that Esperanza is a Christ parallel in an ascetic sense, than “Red Clowns” establishes her as a Christ figure in the sense that she is martyred. In the vignette “Red Clowns,” Esperanza is gang-raped while waiting for her friend Sally at the carnival. This violation reads as a kind of martyrdom, in which Esperanza is an innocent victim. In this particular vignette, the parallels between Esperanza and Christ are more implicit, requiring profound analysis. Like Christ, who waited his entire life to be crucified on the cross, and asks his father to “take this cup from me, if there is another way,” Esperanza quite explicitly says “I didn’t want it, Sally” (Cisneros 99). Martyrdom is often romanticized to a great extent, in the same way that sexual intercourse is: “The way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?” (99) When Esperanza says “I waited such a long time,” she is talking about her wait for Sally, but she is also talking about her wait to lose her virginity, unlike Lois, who, according to the text, brings it on herself: “those are the kind of girls who go into alleys” (72), the victimization of Esperanza is exactly that—a martyrdom. The words “I love you” (99) spoken by the boy with the sour mouth are words of mocking, like the crown of thorns placed on Christ’s head during the crucifixion.

“The Monkey Garden” is a vignette in which the parallels between Esperanza and the paradigmatic Christ are both implicit and explicit. The Monkey Garden itself is like the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ went to pray. Esperanza tells her reader, “This is where I wanted to die and where I tried one day, but not even the monkey garden would have me. It was the last day I would go there” (96). Just as the incident that takes

place in this vignette marks the end of a phase in Esperanza's existence, Christ's time in the Garden of Gethsemane marked the end of his own physical existence on earth. In this vignette, Sally plays the role of the unrepentant sinner. Esperanza becomes angry—she tells the reader that “something inside me wanted to throw a stick”—and this justified anger is not unlike the anger displayed by Christ in the temple on learning that His Father's house had become a den of thieves. Esperanza takes on the role of “savior” very explicitly in this vignette, going to Tito's mother and making an appeal on Sally's behalf—even though Sally doesn't want to be “saved” from them: “Your son and his friends stole Sally's keys and now they won't give them back unless she kisses them and right now they're making her kiss them, I said all out of breath from the three flights of stairs” (97). Tito's mother's responds with, “What do you want me to do, call the cops?” Like Pontius Pilate, Tito's mother doesn't want to get involved or take on any unnecessary responsibility. Esperanza cannot think of anything to say, in much the same way that Christ made a choice not to say anything when he is interrogated like a criminal. She goes on to tell the reader that “I ran back down the three flights of stairs to the garden where Sally needed to be *saved*” (97, emphasis added).

As the text progresses, the *bildungsroman* protagonist Esperanza grows and develops, though “coming of age” in House means becoming *less* American (selfish) as she becomes *more* American (successful). Such a paradox is essential to the creation of meaning in the narrative—Esperanza comes to learn what Christ knew all along—it is impossible to “save” someone who doesn't want to be saved—someone like Sally. Esperanza comes to this realization when Sally tells her to “go home,” almost as if she

were denouncing her. In a sense, Sally is like Peter, who denied knowing Christ in one of Christ's darkest hours. Esperanza tells her reader that "They all looked at me as if *I* was the one that was crazy and made me feel ashamed" (97) When taking into consideration the parallels between Christ, the ultimate *bildungsroman* protagonist, whose "coming of age" narrative contains death on a cross for the salvation of a race of beings that has, for the most part, rejected him, and Esperanza, who also suffers shame and humiliation despite the "prophecies" that foretold her redemption of the poor, nonwhite, and female, this passage from "The Monkey Garden" is extremely important. Esperanza is aware of the boys' (and Sally's) wrongdoing, but the shame is displaced onto her: "They all looked at me as if *I* was the one that was crazy and made me feel ashamed," (97), reminding the reader of Christ on the cross, calling out, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Christ is denounced as a lunatic as a result of the fact that he claims to be the savior, because the Hebrew people had been expecting a "king" and Christ was poor. On the cross, Christ took upon himself (by choice) the shame of the entire world—and there can be no doubt that Cisneros is making an allusion to that displacement here: Christ, who was God, according to the Bible, would not have gone to the cross if there had been another way to save mankind. With Esperanza's own power comes responsibility—the more aware of this power/agency she becomes, the more convicted she is of her responsibility to use it for the good of those who "cannot out" (110).

Esperanza's "coming into power" is established explicitly in the vignette "The Three Sisters." In this vignette, Cisneros presents a set of mysterious, mystical characters that advocate the importance that the ideas that reigned in the "old country" still exist and

operate in the new world. This vignette suggests that “Esperanza” is more than just the protagonist of her own story: as a Christ figure, she is also a vehicle that transforms and legitimizes her Latina culture. In this way, Cisneros challenges the notion of the *bildungsroman* in the sense that Esperanza will never be “free” of Mango Street, just as she will never be free of her Mexican background. The three sisters are able to guess what Esperanza had been thinking, which gives them a specific textual authority. In portraying them in such a way, Cisneros alludes to the prophets of the Bible, which is necessary if House is going to raise the stakes of the *bildungsroman* by suggesting that Esperanza is in fact a sort of female Christ figure.<sup>3</sup> Aesthetically, Cisneros has already suggested that a woman can infiltrate the literary canon, and suggests throughout her text that “femininity” can be divine and that power can emerge from the feminine. If the three sisters are prophetic, than why can’t the female protagonist also be divine?

When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be *Mango Street*. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are. Then, I didn’t know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such as selfish wish. You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said, a little confused (Cisneros 105, emphasis added).

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<sup>3</sup> The three sisters also figure as an explicit allusion to the weird sisters in Shakespeare’s Macbeth, which is also concerned with notions of predestination. Macbeth is not a “self-made man” in the sense that his wife has such a strong influence over him—and Esperanza isn’t a “self-made woman” in the sense that she is molded and influenced by her environment, as well as by the women who come before her and the women who surround her.



While Cisneros rarely invokes Biblical discourse explicitly, she does suggest, over and over again, that there is indeed something divine about Esperanza—being the “hope” of Mango Street is a cross she must simply bear, like it or not. Whether power comes from a masculine source or a feminine one, power and responsibility go hand and hand.

Yet again, the importance that dichotomy plays in creating the rhetorical setting is evident, for with power comes responsibility. Cisneros explores this idea in “Bums in the Attic,” in which the narrator confides in the reader, saying, “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from” (87). Esperanza explicitly differentiates herself from those who are “stuck up,” those who “sleep so close to the stars that they forget those of us who live too much on earth” (86). She presents a critique of the kind of person that the three sisters warn her against becoming. Inviting the bums to live in the attic speaks somewhat explicitly to Biblical discourse in and of itself; just as Christ advocated the kindness towards those who were suffering as a result of their sin, Esperanza hopes to be able to show compassion to those less fortunate than herself. The word “bums” carries a negative connotation, suggesting that they are in fact somewhat responsible for their low social status. However, Esperanza’s willingness to take them in will be an act of unconditional love, reminiscent of Christ’s treatment of prostitutes, lepers, and tax collectors, who are all equivalent to “bums” in the New Testament, where Christ says, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). In “Bums in the Attic,” Cisneros plays with the notion of hospitality in much the same way that the Bible does: just as “the exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted,” Esperanza passes

judgment on “those who live on hills [and] sleep so close to the stars that they forget those of us who live too much on earth” (86), while offering the attic, the part of the house closest to the stars, to passing bums. In this vignette, Esperanza emerges as a prophet in her own right, much like the three sisters. The rhetoric employed in The House on Mango Street underscores the idea that Esperanza, as a Christ-parallel, is somehow greater than those who came before her and influenced her.

Esperanza’s mother is among the many women in the narrative who have influenced Esperanza, women whom Esperanza is destined to overshadow on coming into her own power. In this sense, “A Smart Cookie” is a parable in its own right, much like the story of the prodigal son. However, unlike the prodigal son, Esperanza’s mother regrets having “lived in this city her whole life” (90). Once again, Cisneros challenges conventional male models: Esperanza’s mother condemns *herself* for never having been bold enough to go out into the world and seek her fortune. Her sin is a sin against herself, and no one else, and the sin’s nature is a passive one. “A Smart Cookie” is the story of unrealized potential (“I could’ve been somebody”). Although Cisneros evokes the patriarchal model used in the parable of the prodigal son, she flips it on its head: whereas the prodigal son returns home ashamed because he realizes that his leave-taking was a mistake, Esperanza’s mother is ashamed because she didn’t persevere in her attempt to remake herself: “Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn’t have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains” (91). Recasting the story of the prodigal son in a completely different light, this vignette suggests that while Cisneros would agree that having too much pride is indeed a bad trait,

returning to one's comfort zone after having failed indicates weakness. Esperanza's mother "Can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown" (90).

In a text which is focused on the crossing of borders and the space between them to which one must resort for protection, the content of Cisneros' text is a reflection of its form, which can neither be considered poetry nor prose; it is both and yet it is neither, it is a kind of gray area/borderland itself. According to Sonia Saldívar-Hull, "Mango Street is both lyrical and realistic with the rhythms of poetry and the narrative power of fiction. The difficulty critics have faced in categorizing Mango Street may be due to the fact that it represents un *género nuevo*, a new genre" (Saldívar-Hull 93). Central to the structure and the creation of meaning within The House on Mango Street is the concept of the *bildungsroman*, which Cisneros challenges throughout the course of the narrative by the notion of "crossing borders," culturally, geographically, and textually. Using Christ as a model for Esperanza, she uses Biblical discourse as a major source of textual inspiration. Cisneros' strategies are all interwoven: she makes use of the *bildungsroman* tradition, as well as the notion of the self-made man/woman, and the story of Christ is a *bildungsroman* celebrating the quintessential self-made "man" (self-made because he was also God). This is an important dichotomy, but not the only dichotomy that enriches her text: I have discussed many more in this essay. Cisneros uses notions of cultural and geographical border crossing very explicitly in vignettes like "Mamacita," while she establishes *textual* border crossing by combining the poetic and prose mediums.

The recreation of genre in House is especially significant, because it suggests a textual awareness of the implications that the word “hope” has as a state of being in between; that is, the form and content of House complement one another. We have seen how Esperanza, in overcoming the many obstacles that are put in her path throughout the narrative as a result of being “non-white, poor, and female” (Kuribayashi 165), is a kind of Christ figure. If Cisneros has made it into the canon, she has been able to do so because she uses traditional discourses without being formulaic, and simultaneously remakes the ideas of genre. Exploring the importance of both universal and cultural aesthetics, as well as the thematic drive behind House is essential to understanding and appreciating it as an extremely accessible piece of literature, having earned a place next to works like Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. Cisneros makes use of second person narration in House in order to connect very directly with her reader, and forces the “patriarchal” reader to reconsider his background without coming across as threatening or self-righteous.

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