The Representation of Space in The House on Mango Street

A literary analysis with pedagogical implications for upper secondary students

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Abstract
This essay explores the power dynamics embedded in the construction and perception of spatial environments in the novel *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. With the help of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of space as a socially constructed phenomenon and practice, this essay argues that the characters’ experience and perception of spaces in the novel including the house and the street are entangled with the dominating forces related to gender, identity and patriarchy in the surrounding society. The essay also argues that the novel apart from revealing these power dynamics, also, through its protagonist Esperanza suggests a new kind of space, an alternative and more just space for the individual and the community. Additionally, this essay also discusses and elaborates on the pedagogical implications of using the novel with a focus on space for upper secondary students. An investigation of how individual and social spaces functions in different ways in the novel provides valuable opportunities for teachers and students to reflect and discuss power relations, social injustices and inequities in their community, and allow them, as the protagonist Esperanza, to imagine alternative and more just spaces.

Keywords: The House on Mango Street, Literary analysis, The Production of Space, Social Space, Henri Lefebvre.
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Introduction

Sandra Cisneros’s critically acclaimed novel *The House on Mango Street* explores the coming of age journey of a young Mexican-American girl Esperanza Cordera in an impoverished barrio neighborhood in Chicago. Through forty-four interrelated vignettes the reader gets to experience the social and individual worlds of the Latinx community through the young girl’s perceptions of it and her reflections on the unjust conditions under which the migrant community lives. The material conditions of the society of the poor Latinx neighborhood are spatially marked by conflicts of gender, culture, ethnicity and identity and the impact of power these conditions impose on the people living there. The story revolves around how Esperanza, through her writing and aspirations towards education, tries to find a sense of belonging and a space of her own and for her community. Her social interactions in and experiences of Mango Street lead her to imagining an alternative shared space for the community that is different from what her surroundings seem to impose on her. This challenging journey of growing up and finding one’s space in the world is something everyone can relate to, regardless of age. The novel’s preoccupation with space facilitates an understanding of the injustices and the social and cultural conditions that the novel considers with the possibility to address topics, such as gender, identity, ethnicity and class from a critical viewpoint, which may in turn challenge and change the way we think about our lived experiences of spaces.

This essay will thus explore the cultural and social implications and meanings of space in *The House on Mango Street* with the aim of revealing the ways in which the social production/construction of space functions as a means of control, hence of domination determined by power structures and social hierarchies; to be more specific, the social, individual, and domestic spaces of the novel are presented in ways that reveal the inequities and structures of domination and power in everyday social relations; the structures of domination are related to issues including gender, cultural belonging and identity. Social and individual spaces, thus, reveal the external and internal conflicts and contradictions between the characters that Esperanza depicts in her writings, and the larger ideological and social mechanisms including those of patriarchal expectations, belonging and cultural difference, with literary and political implications. But at the same time, apart from revealing these mechanisms, the novel’s use of social, individual, and domestic spaces, such as the house and the street, goes beyond the “exposition” of how the production of space is entangled with domination and power; through its protagonist, the novel also opens up, as this thesis claims, to imagining a different type of communal and individual space, an alternative and more just space. By
observing the society and the people in it, Esperanza develops an understanding of the limits and possibilities society might offer her, as well as the expectations that are imposed on her, which become visible through her observations of different characters and the spaces they occupy. The novel, in this way, allows for an understanding of space as a social construct, meaning that the function of space is dependent not simply on neutral and natural conditions, but rather on how space is perceived and lived and determined by society. Through her reflections, Esperanza implicitly detects and acknowledges power structures in society; it is this awareness of the frames and structures of society with the help of education that enables her to reach beyond and imagine an alternative space.

More specifically, Cisneros addresses the topics of gender, identity, ethnicity and class in relation to space and place throughout the novel through the young girl Esperanza’s gaze. Spaces that evidently are in the center of attention are, as the title of the novel indicates: the house and the street. This essay will specifically focus on the narrative of these spaces and investigate the power dynamics entangled their construction; particularly, the power dynamics that are related to relations of gender and of belonging. To this end, the analysis in this essay will focus on three female migrant characters and follow their trajectories of how they relate to their domestic and social spaces. As a secondary and additional focus, instances whereas Esperanza is imagining a new space, an external space beyond Mango Street will also be analyzed. Last but not least as an additional focus, this thesis will also elaborate on the pedagogical implications of a focus on the social dynamics of space as they are explored in the novel.

The notion of space as a social construct is understood in this essay in accordance with the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who coined the phrase in his pioneering study *The Production of Space*. In his study, he explores the relationship between the mental space and the real space; in other words, the space in philosophy and the physical and social space in the spheres in which we live. As this essay will further explain in the theoretical section, Lefebvre claims that “space is not an empty or neutral container – or a blank canvas upon which – social interactions take place” (Ford 178). On the contrary, space is produced by and through social interactions, repeatedly, over and over again. Hence, it is produced and therefore also productive. In this way, space can serve as a tool of action, and therefore as a tool of control, of domination and of power (Lefebvre 26). With the help of Lefebvre’s theory, where he examines the constructed nature of space, it is possible to demonstrate how our perceptions, experiences, and understandings of space are socially constructed rather than being neutral, and to pinpoint the underlying processes and mechanisms of its production; “so that we might begin,
collectively and intentionally, to produce space differently, more justly” (Ford 178) and alter the power structure, as Esperanza in the end of the novel seeks to do. For these reasons, Lefebvre’s notions on space are precisely the kind of critical approach needed in order to reveal the power dynamics of the spaces in the novel that this essay seeks to analyze.

Lefebvre’s notion of how the production of space can serve as a tool of thought and of action, and as a “means of control, and hence of domination” (26) is particularly useful for an analysis of the spaces of the novel since it helps to convey the power dynamics entangled in the everyday life for the inhabitants of the Mexican barrio in Chicago. Even though Lefebvre’s theory was not initially developed for literary analysis, it is particularly apt to use as such for the analysis of *The House on Mango Street*, due to its explicit focus on both the mental and physical space and their implicational entanglement.

Furthermore, examining the novel with a focus on the cultural aspects of social space in relation to community and individuality, as this essay will show in more detail later on, also has important pedagogical implications and relevance. To focus on the functions and perceptions of social space in the novel *The House on Mango Street* is useful for pedagogical reasons since it reveals the ways in which social spaces and spatial environments functions as tools of action, thought, and sometimes control in different ways, rather than simply having natural or neutral meanings. Furthermore, it reveals how individuals relate to their community and the conflicts and power dynamics that underlie in their basic, ordinary reality of life. These insights, might help students, as will be explained later in this study, to reflect on their own relation to social spaces and their status, and place within them.

In the curriculum for upper secondary students by the Swedish National Agency for Education special emphasis is put on the importance for students to “be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different context and parts of the world” and get the ability to discuss and reflect on these (“English” 2). Furthermore, the curriculum also states that students should receive “[t]exts of different kinds and for different purposes” and “[c]ontemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres” (“English” 11). The novel *The House on Mango Street* deals intensely with such issues: different living conditions of the Mexican barrio, as well as the social issues and cultural features of the people living there. To introduce the novel with attention to the aspect of the Mexican American community and space in the context of the US might allow for critical perspectives for students to reflect on the meanings and functions of space for cultural minorities and for different cultural contexts with issues relating to gender, belonging and identity. Becoming familiar with different cultural and social contexts might allow them to
reflect upon their own differences and how they relate to the community and spaces they live in. Furthermore, the novel highlights another related aspect, which is that the novel in itself, through the trajectory of the protagonist Esperanza’s life communicates the importance of acquiring an education for oneself for imagining alternative and just spaces, which is something particularly relevant for teachers to communicate towards their students.

**Background**

Before getting into a detailed analysis of the novel’s characters and the power dynamics of space, it is useful to introduce some background information about the Mexican American community that the novel focuses on in connection to the critical literature surrounding the novel’s characters and social spaces.

Olga L. Herrera discusses the importance of taking a critical perspective informed by the social and historical location of Mexicans in Chicago when considering the novel. Such a perspective points to, Herrera argues, a transnational production of space that situates the narrator Esperanza simultaneously both in Chicago and Mexico at the same time (103). This space, “Mexican Chicago” as Herrera calls is, demonstrates “a transmigrant production of social space that moves away from binary understandings of the nation-state and that troubles the assimilationist narrative” (104). She argues, that by placing her character in this space, Cisneros allows Esperanza to navigate the multifaceted intersections between “subjectivity, identity, place, belonging, and concepts of home” through a transnational consciousness.

This transnational consciousness has grown out of the migration histories of Chicago and Mexico City. As early as the 1900s, Mexican male workers went to find fortune in agriculture in the Midwest and in Chicago’s industry. During the World War I changes were made in the immigration law, in favor of Mexican workers, allowing them to enter the country without having to go through the literacy and tax requirements. The seasonal agricultural work allowed workers to seek other opportunities during the off season, which a lot of them found in the urban cities of the Midwest, like Chicago (107-108).

In Chicago, Mexican labor came to determine the spatial locations of the community, whereas, when Mexicans moved in, white people moved out and significant Mexican neighborhoods emerged, next to the African American neighborhoods, as in the case of the community in *The House on Mango Street*. In the Southwest, there was a long tradition of a white/brown dichotomy that dominated the race relations, but the racialization of the Mexican communities in Chicago unfolded differently. Mexicans in Chicago found themselves “located along a slippery racial spectrum, where they were identified in terms of what they were not –
not African American, not quite white, and decisively non-American” (110). These notions, along with the notion of the population of Puerto Rican and Cuban immigrants affected how Mexican immigrants understood their ethnic identity. They were forced to form an identity based on their “Mexicanness” and created social policies concerning gender and class distinctions within their Mexican community (110). As it might appear, Chicago is a city divided by racial and ethnic segregation, whereas place is intimately connected to ethnic identity, which in the case of the novel, as Herrera argues, is crucial for an understanding of “perceived competition over resources, including neighborhood space and employment” (110-112).

The novel *The House on Mango Street*, written in the late 1970s, takes place in that period of time, when demographic changes were unfolding in Chicago. As the Mexican and Puerto Rican moved in and appropriated the inner city’s neighborhoods, white middle- and working-class people moved out (111). This is exemplified for instance, in the vignette “Cathy Queen of Cats”, where Esperanza, who just moved in to Mango Street, encounters the girl Cathy, who says she can be her friend until Tuesday, which is when her and her family “got to” move out, since “the neighborhood is getting bad” (Cisneros 12-13).

In sum, the presence of a migrant community in Chicago, produces a space that comes to belong both to Mexico and Chicago, which in the novel takes the form of Mango Street. In regard to the protagonist Esperanza, being a daughter of an American Mexican and a Mexican immigrant, Esperanza produces her reality in relation to her experiences of Mexico, however she recalls them (116). As Herrera concludes, the “memory of Mexico is written over the built environment of Chicago, creating a barrio space that is personalized to their own transnational experience” (116). This discussion on how the migrant and transnational experiences play part in the production and reproduction of space in the community in the novel adds to the importance of why it is important to view the novel with a focus on space and its social functions. Such a focus provides a better understanding of how the community in the novel works, which this essay seeks to understand.

**Previous research**

Particularly in the past decades, literary studies have extensively considered issues of spatiality, often referred to as the spatial turn (Tabur 18). Examinations have focused on the ways in which space is addressed, represented and constructed in works of literature (Tabur 11). This recent emphasis on the notion of space in literary criticism has also been reflected on in the critical work of Cisneros’s novel.
In her critical work on Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Yomna Saber for instance analyses the novel’s preoccupation with the spaces of the city and the street in the novel through the concept of flâneur. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s philosophical reflections on the topic, Saber defines flâneur as “represented as the empathic intellectual male stroller who scrutinizes the urban spectacle and turns it into a readable text, while frequenting the ambiguous boundaries between interior and exterior spaces of the city” (69). Saber argues that the novel brings a new version of the figure of the flâneur not only changing the context to a modern American city, and a Mexican-American barrio but also by changing the perspective from the typically male gaze of the flâneur to the female gaze of Esperanza. In her analysis, Saber states that Esperanza, categorized as a brown flâneuse, experiences several restrictions in her society based on gender, ethnicity and class. Through her writing, she creates her spatial and cultural urban map of the Mexican barrio, a substitute for the modern city (70).

Another critic who has paid attention to the significance of space in the novel is Tomoko Kuribayashi. He discusses how the protagonist Esperanza manages to create a new safe space for herself and for the females she wishes to help through the combination of three elements. Esperanza’s bilingualism, her ability to write, and her experiences of oppression in a segregated Mexican community within a broader dominant white culture (176). Holding these abilities gives her an exclusive spatial vision, Kuribayashi argues, as well as the ability to access and navigate both worlds of her society: the Mexican and the American. Kuribayashi also points to the fact that Esperanza is one of the fortunate ones from her community. She has the language skills, a vision and the strength of the women around her that is needed to reach beyond. Women with Mexican origins living in underprivileged spaces as in the novel often have three directions to choose between in life: being a nun, a prostitute or a mother in the home (Anzaldúa 17). Esperanza however aims for a fourth choice: to become self-autonomous through education (Anzaldúa 17).

A third critic that considers space in *The House on Mango Street* is Karan W. Martin, who focuses on the specific space of the house and home: the domestic space. She contrasts the privileged representation of an idealized romanticized home of the upper-middle-class with the representation of home in Cisneros’s novel (50). Whereas the former is represented as a stable safe space, vastly characterized by solitude and refuge, the latter is pretty much the opposite;

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1 The concept of the flâneuse was first explored in the writings of Charles Baudelaire’s poetry, which depicted a male flâneur in the nineteenth-century in the streets of Paris (Saber). Walter Benjamin then returned to the concept in the twentieth-century, but derived from the Parisian context into an American context (Saber 70). Women were not included in the notions of flâneuse until Janet Wolff addressed them in her essay “The invisible flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity” in 1985 (Saber 72).
the domestic spaces in the novel reflect the imposition of the dominant Anglo culture, concerning race, class, and gender hierarchies and are represented as unprotected, simultaneously un-fixed and semi-public spaces (50). Furthermore, Martin explores how the novel attempts to give voice to the marginalized protagonists and their paths’ “to transgress gendered borders and gain corporeal mobility”, as well as how it offers “counter-poetics” of the normative mainstream domestic space (51).

All in all, these critics explore important aspects of space in the novel, and provide valuable insights into its implications for questions of gender, class and race. This essay adds to this discussion by focusing on the socially constructed nature of space and its relation to issues of belonging and patriarchy, and how space functions as a tool not only for control but also for imagining alternatives as Esperanza does. Focus will also be put on issues of gender, adding to these existing critical insights with the focus on space as a social product in Lefebvre’s sense, as well as further elaborate what spaces themselves socially and culturally mean, and how power dynamics of the society affects the characters. Additionally, this essay considers the pedagogical implications of focusing on the notion of space while reading the novel, which none of the above discussed critics do.

As discussed in the introduction, The House on Mango Street provides valuable opportunities for educational implications, and is considered one of the classics in the US these days. Among the critics that have taken into account the novel’s pedagogical usages, Kathleen J. Ryan discusses how the novel can be used for white privileged students to raise awareness of their cultural dominance and encourage them to recognize themselves as raced, classed and gendered. She states that through aesthetic reading and engaged pedagogy, many of her students managed to locate the gap between themselves and the protagonist Esperanza, and in that way started to gain consciousness of their own privileges in the society; “this process of consciousness raising attempts to disrupt naïve notion that race, class, and gender differences do not matter; rather, they dramatically affect the quality of all our lives” (Ryan).

While Ryan discusses how Cisneros’s novel can be used for white privileged students, M. Alayne Sullivan argues for the novel’s value for students at an at-risk middle school with students of Latinx, African American, and Caucasian backgrounds with low socio-economic status. She writes that to use a book such as The House on Mango Street where students’ lives and identities are represented empower them, as well as make them more confident, both as readers and as students (154). Sullivan concludes by stating that we need to provide our struggling students “with opportunities to read and respond to literature that can engage them” (172). There are thus several studies that consider the novel from a pedagogical angle as these
critics do but they do not consider the notion of space and its social production as this thesis additionally seeks to do.

**Theoretical framework**

As mentioned in the introductory section, in order to explore the spatial environments in the novel and their social meanings, the work of Lefebvre will be used as a theoretical framework in this essay. According to Lefebvre, every society creates its own social spaces and has its own spatial practices, through which they forge their own “appropriated” space (31). This social space, thus, consists of two dialectically interrelated relations of production and reproduction: the bio-physiological relations amongst the sexes, age groups and the organization of the family, and the “hierarchical social functions” in the division of labour power. These are all elements that determine spatial relations of individuals and groups and their roles (32). To demonstrate and understand how the production of space is constituted and how it has come to dominate spatial experiences, Lefebvre introduces a triad with critical concepts which are dialectically related to each other. The triad consists of: (1) spatial practice, (2) representations of space and (3) representational spaces (33), also known as perceived space, conceived space and lived space (Tabur 22).

Spatial practice (perceived space) refers to the production and reproduction of the organization of everyday life, concerning the family, workplace, the community of the society and the state. Lefebvre writes that “the spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it” (38). This notion is seen in every society and every society creates its own space and has its own spatial practices. In relation to the novel, the spatial practices are colored by the dominating structures/forces of their society, such as poverty and patriarchy. This notion is also referred to as perceived space since it concerns the way we tend to think about the spaces that structure our daily lives, such as between the daily realities and urban reality. Conceived spaces are on the other hand tied to the “order” which the relations of production impose or try to impose on individuals and groups (33), and it is the imagined, mental space that carries in turn abstractions and impacts on the perceptions and relations to space of individuals and groups (Tabur 22). These conceived spaces are produced by the dominating forces in a society, such as city planners, scientist, urbanists, landlords, bankers, real estate developers; “-all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with

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2 The urban space is further linked to Lefebvre’s notion of utopia, a concept used by him to address the impossible in the possible in the everydayness of urban life in order to extend the possible. See Lefebvre chapter six and the article by Coleman for further reading.
what is conceived” (38). The perceived space and the conceived space are thus intimately linked: while the perceived space refers to the relationship to and perception of the spaces of individuals and groups. These perceptions are not independent from the way spaces are conceived and ordered or given meaning more generally in society. The individual’s perception of space participates in and is closely entangled with the larger and more abstract ideas of space and the meanings that they are determined by. Representations of space (conceived space) in this context tell us what to do in certain spaces, what is allowed and not and it might be thought of as the “bird’s-eye-view” of a society (Ford 181). It is also the dominant space in a society (Lefebvre 39). Lastly, representational spaces (lived space) refer to the spaces that are directly lived in people’s daily life, it is the space of the users, the space of the dominated (38). It is about being and feeling. As Lefebvre puts it, “[t]his is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate (38). He further explains, the perceived space, conceived space and lived space are all related to one another and they flow into each other. As will be shown in the analysis, this is also the case in the novel: the characters’ perception of spaces such as the house and the street and their meanings reproduce and are linked to larger and more abstract ideological and social structures that determine the meaning and functions of those spaces in ways that are related to issues of belonging, gender and patriarchy.

With his theory of space as a social product, Lefebvre searches to demonstrate how space is produced, to make visible the underlying processes of the production of space in society, in order to pave the way for a better understanding of the power structure in it. By making the power structure visible, it opens up for new perspectives and possibilities to question and change it. To illustrate this, he contributed with a discussion on a new kind of space, which he came to discuss as “differential space” (52). This new space emphasizes differences, in contrast to the “abstract space” that “tends towards homogeneity, [and] towards elimination of existing differences or peculiarities” (52). The abstract space is dominated by hegemony and constantly produced through imposition of normality by enforcing “a logic that puts an end to conflicts and contradictions” and destroys anything that resists to fit into it (23). Nevertheless, Lefebvre states that, even “though defeated, they live on, and from time to time they begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle” (23). By accentuating differences in abstract or conceived space it is possible to restore what abstract space tends to break up and in that way, create this new and more just space. These notions of creating a differential space correlates with the protagonist Esperanza’s journey of finding her own space, alternate to the spaces she depicts in her surroundings.
There are then two main reasons as to why Lefebvre’s theory is useful for an analysis of the novel that focuses on the social meanings of space and its relation to societal structures. Firstly, this theoretical framework helps to show how environments in the novel are imagined as not just being empty or neutral containers where individuals and groups exist in. The social spaces of Mango Street, the house, and the various spatial environments the characters exist in are instead socially constructed in the sense that their meanings are highly determined by and entangled with larger structures of power hierarchies that exist in the community and in the larger society, whether this is related to gender, class, or issues of belonging. These in turn have a direct effect on the character’s perception and experiences of space. Secondly, Lefebvre’s theory allows for an understanding of how in their perception of and uses of spaces, individuals participate in the reproduction of the meanings of space that are conceived and ordered by larger structures; in this sense, individuals and groups as in The House on Mango Street are not passive recipients, neither are they free from those structures, but they are active agents that are entangled with such structures in their individual practices and self-perceptions and roles. In this sense, as in the case of the protagonist Esperanza, the individuals (and groups) have also, by requiring an understanding of the power relations and structures, the potential to imagine spaces differently to bring change. As will be shown in the analysis, this refers to the differential space Esperanza dreams of.

To use this theory for literary analysis was not primarily what Lefebvre had in mind, but he states that: “any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every quise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about” (15). For the interpretive points in this essay, then Lefebvre’s concepts are useful to the process of analyzing the spatial practices of the society and in relations that the protagonist Esperanza reflects upon.

Analysis
There are many spaces in the novel that are interesting to analyze, and one of the most frequently described, illustrated and represented spaces in the novel is the one of the house. Esperanza reflects upon the different housing arrangements and the meaning of a house and a home for herself and the different characters throughout the story. By “[w]itnessing her friends’ movement in transmigratory circuits, Esperanza contemplates the meaning of home through the lens of their travels” (Herrera 115). The house becomes a symbol for belonging, both of her resistance to belong, as well as her longing for a place where she feels true belonging: a place of her own. Through her reflections on the women’s lives on Mango Street, she successively maps out the frames and structures of her society in order to find her own path.
In the vignette “No Speak English”, Esperanza reflects upon the life of the Hispanic woman “Mamacita”, who against her will recently immigrated to America with her baby boy, and moved in with her husband on Mango Street. The apartment where they live functions in a way that reflects the migrant experience of being torn between two worlds: between the place left behind and the new place. These notions are significant for understanding what home and belonging mean. Mamacita’s new home seems to function as a space of confinement where she seeks to protect herself from the influences of the outside. At the same time, the apartment, the new migrant home, seems to be a space that controls her movement. She stays inside and seems unwilling to go out, being trapped in her new space; her new space where she is doubly marginalized; being a woman and an immigrant. Through Esperanza’s reflections Mamacita’s confinement and oppression are evident:

Somebody said she’s too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn’t come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words. She knows to say: He not here for when the landlords comes, No speak English if anybody else comes, and Holy smokes. I don’t know where she learnt this, but I heard her say it one time and it surprised me. (Cisneros 77)

Esperanza believes that Mamacita does not want to go out since she is afraid of speaking English, and most likely, there is something to it. Even so, it might not be the language in itself that scares her, but the implications that follow by not being able to speak the standard language of a society when she is out on the street. As Lefebvre argues, in order to access a space “individuals (children, adolescents) who are, paradoxically, already within it, must pass tests. This has the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation, within social space” (35). In the spatial practice one “must either recognize” oneself or “lose” oneself in that space in order to access the reserved spaces (35). The spatial practice of the Mexican barrio that Mamacita paradoxically is a part of–since she is in it but unwilling to participate–is a space she must recognize herself in and participate in or she loses herself within it. Language in this sense, becomes a barrier Mamacita has to overcome to enter the reserved space of society. In Lefebvre’s terms, the test is then the English language, and the reserved space in this instance is the Mexican American neighborhood whereas English is the standard language. Not being able to speak the language in the society becomes the marker of her confinement. For Mamacita, this new situation is frightening, which is seen in the end of the vignette when she gets
devastated when her son begins to sing a Pepsi commercial in English. Because, even if her inability to speak the standard language becomes a marker for her confinement, she also refuses to acknowledge it together with other external influences such as commercial signs and messages of her new American society, and in that way, by refusing to acknowledge, she protects herself from it; by neglecting the outer world of her new home she can still continue to live in her old home: “[s]he sits by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country”, dreaming to go back (77). The space of the window and the Spanish radio here indicate how she lives in a world in between; it represents her refusal of the new external world and at the same time showing how she perceives it and is close to it. Furthermore, Mamacita’s space functions both as a space of confinement that controls her and also as a space of protection and resistance to the outside, that nevertheless in the end intrudes when her son sings the commercial song. Returning to Lefebvre, these very notions illustrate that space is very much a social construction, that its meanings are dependent on the social position of the subject: Mamacita and her migrant experiences. This socially constructed nature of space also comes to the fore when we recognize the gender dynamics of Mamacita’s confinement. The space of the home as it functions for Mamacita also reveals issues related to gender: one of the few phrases Mamacita does know is: “He not here”, which she repeats when someone from the outside seeks to interact with her, indicating that her husband is the one who does the speaking for her and manages her relation to the outside. Moreover, it illustrates the masculine dominance in their relationship; the phrase is once again a marker for her confinement. Distinctly, this is what she says when the landlord comes and presumably collects rent. Her phrase reveals that their economy is the husband’s responsibility. By being the person in charge, the one who decides and who pays, he becomes the one who holds power in their domestic space. Even though Mamacita is forced to sympathize with her husband’s will, she holds on to the belief that they might return to her lost home, but he refuses. Angrily, he tries to demand his wife to speak English, as well as stating that this is their home now: “¡Ay!, Caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!” (Cisneros 78). This argument reflects how space functions as a reflection of inner and external conflicts. The inner conflict of Mamacita is that she faces a dilemma about what home means, and where she can locate it; she feels like it is a place she should belong, which she does not. Thus, the external conflict refers to the social relationship with her husband and the new external world of America in general, which is determined by inclusion and exclusion (by speaking or not speaking English), and power and domination (in her relationship to her husband, which is evident in his commanding utterance). But his actions are somewhat
paradoxical; even though he tries to dominate her, he also seems to want her to be part of their new society. This might say something about the general migrant experiences of belonging and not belonging, about what home means and where it is located. Mamacita’s husband might have reached to the point where he considers himself to belong both to Chicago and to their lost home, the notion that Herrera discusses as a transnational consciousness (105)—a transnational consciousness he evidently does not share with his wife. Nevertheless, he wants her to gain access to their new society and pass the test to put it in Lefebvre’s terms. This dominated space that Mamacita’s husband tries to regulate, by painting the walls in the color of her lost home and by demanding her to speak English, he wants to master and appropriate the space of his house (Lefebvre 28). In the end of the vignette, Mamacita’s double marginalization becomes especially visible in the aforementioned scene, when her baby boy starts to sing the Pepsi commercial in English. Mamacita exclaims: “No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears” (Cisneros 78). Her baby boy, speaking, not in his mother tongue, but in the language favored by his father, and the dominant society, which she does not feel she belongs. Her heart breaks as she realizes that her son now is entering the dominant society which she does not want to belong to. The spatial practice of everyday life for Mamacita and her family are colored thus by the values and codes of the dominating forces in the space of the society. In accordance with Lefebvre, it is the power of the outer world of the house, as well as, the patriarchal power within it that determine the perceptions of the characters, and their actions and control Mamacita (Lefebvre 26).

Lastly, this vignette says something about the spatial practice of the neighborhood. For one, it indicates that the life of Mamacita is something the people of the neighborhood are concerned with. Probably there is a lot of gossiping, and people wonder why she is not part of their community. Also, the notion that she is not mentioned by name, but by a pseudonym says something: Indeed, Mamacita is not just any pseudonym but is used in mock-Spanish for “sexy” (Mendoza-Denton 146), mostly used by men catcalling women, thus, sexually objectifying them. This notion exemplifies how the objectification of women has become neutralized in a particular way in this societal space, especially since Esperanza does not reflect upon or question it. This exemplifies Lefebvre’s notion of how the spatial practice of a society secrets its space, how “it produces it slowly and surely as it masters to appropriates it” (31).

Another character that is faces marginalization much like Mamacita, yet in different ways, is Rafaela in the vignette “Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays” (Cisneros 79-80). Rafaela is a woman locked indoors by her husband because he is afraid that she will run away since she is “too beautiful” (79). Only on Tuesdays, when her husband is out,
is she able to bend the rules he set up for her by asking some kids to go and fetch her a drink from the shop. The meaning of home for Rafaela is in alignment with Mamacita’s, a reflection of being torn between two worlds, except, for Rafaela, these two worlds are the inner and outer spaces of her apartment. The space of her home is controlled by her husband, hence a product of his dominance, but through Esperanza’s reflections we get to know what Rafaela might be dreaming of beyond patriarchal dominance. Esperanza’s reflections suggest that space not only functions as a means of control, but also as a means of expressing desires, which allows for a new kind of space to emerge: an imaginative, alternative space.

On Tuesdays Rafaela’s husband comes home late because that’s the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at. Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s. (Cisneros 79)

The fate of Rafaela is determined by the gender dichotomy of the barrio, whereas the social space is ruled by gender stratification and holds different spaces for men and women (Saber 80). Whilst her husband can do whatever he wants, she is forced to adapt to his rules and stay indoors at all times. For her husband, it does not stop by having set rules since he even assumes her to break them if she gets the chance; he evidently does not trust his wife, so he locks the door to be able to control her. This domestic space, controlled by the husband, tells Rafaela what she can or cannot do. This brings Lefebvre’s discussion of “the general fact that walls, enclosures and façades serve to define both a scene (where something takes place) and an obscene area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated” (36). The scene is their apartment where she is locked in, and the obscene might be illustrated in the case of Rafaela, through her imagination. She leans out of the window; the window being a symbol throughout the novel of “the dialectics between outer and inner spaces”, hence for Rafaela it becomes her gateway to get a taste of the outside world, as well as a gateway that allows her to dream of what her life could be like (Saber 81). Dreaming she was Rapunzel, who awaited a prince to free her with a happy ending (Cisneros 79). Only when her husband is away is she able to use the gateway, with the help of the kids who buy her a drink and send it up in a paper bag through the window (80). Lefebvre states that the things that are not allowed to happen at the scene are relegated and that “whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden, thus has its own hidden space on the near or far side of a frontier” (36). Her leaning out the
window may then illustrate this “own hidden space”, where she for once is the agent. Moreover, the hidden space that the window allows her to have also lets her dream of what is out there: even if it is out of reach, it indeed allows for imagination; imagination becomes a gateway to fulfilling desires, where the imaginer can be the one in control.

Esperanza imagines that Rafaela dreams of “sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet like an island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes like dice and open homes with keys” (80). An island with no walls or doors, a place where she can be free. A dance hall where people choose to go to enjoy life and where people are free to choose who to look at; a scene were a woman like Rafaela can be free from patriarchal dominance and allowed to reach for her own desires and dreams. This lived dominated space of Rafaela, also exemplifies Lefebvre’s notion on it as being a “space which the imagination seeks so change and appropriate” (39).

The home for Mamacita and Rafaela is a place of confinement and oppression, but it also invites longing and dreaming for something else, which connects with the fate of a third character, Sally, who in contrast to the others does find a way to break free from her home and chase her dream. But unfortunately, her escape for something better turns out to be an extension of the oppression she has endured in her life, by ending up in a new abusive home.

Sally is a friend of Esperanza, whom she depicts in several vignettes. She seems to be a girl who represents much of the violence and oppression that women in their society have to endure. With an extremely abusive father, she desperately tries to escape home by marrying at a very young age, to a husband that ends up having the same violent behavior as her father. In that way, the man is seen both as the savior and the one who imprisons women. Home, for Sally, functions as a means of control, oppression and confinement, first by the dominance of her father, and later on by the dominance of her husband. Her life thus becomes a representation of the production and reproduction of the spatial practice: patriarchal violence and oppression of women.

When Esperanza first introduces Sally in the vignette with the same name, she is depicted as a girl that interests the boys in school, and that they think she is beautiful (81). This notion troubles Sally’s father because from his point of view, being a beautiful girl is trouble. His sisters ran away from home and brought shame on the family and he is scared that Sally will do the same: He controls her by forbidding her to go out, as well as telling her how to dress and not to wear makeup, and he hits her. Sally repeats “He never hits me hard” (92), as a way to excuse his behavior and to protect herself from it, to refuse to accept the abusiveness of his behavior might be the only way she can protect herself from it. Repeating it over and over again,
might be a way to try to convince her self that it is not as bad as it seems. Similarly, her mother
does not seem to interfere with her husband who hits their child, she just cares for the wounds
and “rubs lard on all the places where it hurts” (92) like she is supposed to do. The relations in
Sally’s family go in line with the stereotypes of Mexican family relations that Laura Paz
discusses, where the traditional roles of women and men are strongly rooted; the women are
supposed to be submissive to the male figures of their lives (11), a stereotype that the main
character definitely steps outside. The women are forced to go along with the patriarchal show,
which actually unfortunately contributes to the production and reproduction of it. Sally dreams
of falling in love and escaping the judgments and prohibitions that control her life. The
conceived space of a happy marriage is what makes her endure the situation she is in, and she
needs her escape so badly that she marries “young and not ready” with “a marshmallow
salesman” that she met at a school dance (101). Once again, she tries to persuade herself that
everything is in order, since “she says she is in love”, but Esperanza sees through it and thinks
she did it to escape her father and her abusive home (101). In her new home, she is now stuck
with another abusive violent man who dominates her life. This new home is once again, as for
the character Rafaela, a product of the male dominance which is seen clearly in the end of the
vignette “Linoleum Roses”.

Except he won’t let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t let her look out the
window. And he doesn’t like her friends, so nobody gets to visit unless he is working.
She sits at home because she is afraid to go out without his permission. She looks at all
the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes
looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor,
the ceiling smooth as a wedding cake. (Cisneros 102)

Once again, Sally’s life is determined by what she is not allowed to do, which
exemplifies Lefebvre’s notion that “the ultimate foundation of social space is prohibition” (35).
Prohibition in these scenes is enacted both through individual authority figures such as Sally’s
father and her husband, but they are also maintained by the ideological structures embedded in
the gender relations in society, which by extension, in the case of Sally, make spatial
environments like walls, windows, and home, spaces of control and domination. In the case of
prohibition being the defining feature of social space, this is seen when individuals, in this case
Sally, attempts to navigate in space and the most influential aspect for her is that of what she is
not allowed to do or what she is not allowed to have. Sally’s husband does not even let her look
out the window—the window that for Rafaela became a gateway that allowed her to dream of the outside world. Instead Sally is forced to look at the things that she dreamt of, the roses on the floor and the ceiling that reminds her of a wedding cake, which constantly reminds her of the disappointments of her illusion of a happy marriage (Cisneros 102). Sally’s horrible fate represents the cycle of domestic violence, the production and reproduction of it, and how ingrained it is in space. Her desperate attempt to escape leads to another confinement.

So far, the analysis has focused on how space functions as a means of control, dominance and power in the domestic spaces of the characters Mamacita, Rafaela and Sally and how these spaces represent the patriarchal perceived, conceived, and lived space. Esperanza’s reflections on the dominated spaces (the conceived spaces) surrounding her becomes the birthplace of her initiative of finding/creating an alternative and more just space. In Lefebvre’s terms, this brings in the notion of differential space, which in contrast to the abstract space, which tends to uphold hegemony at all means, emphasizes differences (52). For instance, in the vignette “Bums in the Attic” Esperanza imagines a differential space, an inclusive space that defies social hierarchy. She wants “a house on the hill like the ones with the gardens where Papa works” (86), except she will not be like the ones who live there; the ones who “sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth” (86). Esperanza has always dreamt of a “real house” such as the ones up on the hill, except she realizes that she does not want to forget who she is and where she comes from when she attains that space of desire. She does not want to be like those people, who look down on people like her, as if people like her were not worth as much. She wants to challenge the class hierarchy and not simply imagine a space for her individual fulfillment and desires, by welcoming anyone in her future home. She imagines, that she will happily and proudly perform the kind act of housing homeless people in her attic: “Bums, I’ll say, and I’ll be happy”. Moreover, she knows “how it is to be without a home”, and has come to realize that the quality of one’s house does not equal one’s worth, as she states: “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am and where I come from” (Cisneros 86).

Additionally, the alternative and more just space that Esperanza creates/imagines calls for the patriarchy to be questioned and paves the way for women to gain power. In Esperanza’s perception of society, it is the men that own the world: they are the ones that dominate the social practices. But Esperanza defies this, stating that “[h]er power is her own” and “[s]he will not give it away”, she will not get stuck like the other women on Mango Street, and that she is too strong for her (Mango Street) to keep her (110). This differential space is reached through her writing, which is the very act that sets her free. But she is determined to use her power not only
for her own advantage, but when she left she will be back “[f]or the ones [she] left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (110).

**Implications for Education**

The literary work *The House on Mango Street* deals with issues of cultural differences, gender, social justice and belonging – issues, that this study explores and analyzes – which are highly relevant for educational and pedagogical purposes. In today’s society, our students face new and unique challenges related to their experiences and perceptions of diversity, belonging, and identity, which the novel deals with intensely. The literary work of Sandra Cisneros, in this sense, can be relatable from the perspective of the students for several reasons since it engages with multiple issues that are relevant for them, such as gender, identity, ethnicity and class; the focus in the analysis in this essay has been on the aspect of social space, and how space can serve as a tool for control and domination, as well as how it can open up to imagine a new kind of space: a more just space. To particularly focus on how space functions in the novel, as this thesis does, might, in a classroom context allow the students to think about their own relation to space, and more specifically on their own cultural and social environments and lived experiences of belonging and social justice. The focus on functions of social space in the novel provides valuable opportunities for teachers and learners to detect and reflect on how power relations and social injustices and inequities in their communities, just as in the novel, are embedded within the different, and at times conflicting perceptions and understandings of space. Such a perspective might also, give them the opportunity, as for the protagonist Esperanza, to imagine and create an alternative, and more just space for themselves and for others.

Significantly, the alternative, and more just space that Esperanza imagines in the novel includes writing and higher education, and in that way, the novel also promotes the importance and relevance of education for social change. In extension, this notion of what opportunities education brings allow students to acquire a meta perspective on education, underlining that gaining an education, that is to say, gaining knowledge: is a kind of power to make a difference. The connection between knowledge and power brings once again Lefebvre to the discussion, who states that the ruling class of the society “seeks to maintain its hegemony by all available means”, knowledge being one of them (10). There is that kind of knowledge which serves power and then there is “a form of knowing which refuses to acknowledge power” (Lefebvre 10). As teachers, it is important to give our students the best tools and knowledge so that they can go out in the world as empowered and confident individuals that are capable of fulfilling
their dreams, and the focus on social spaces and how they function in a novel might be one way of encouraging this aspect in a pedagogical context.

Furthermore, an interpretive approach to space in relation to the novel might be used to improve the students’ critical literacy, in the sense that it might bring a critical perspective and awareness for the students to see and reflect on how the seemingly neutral and natural relations in space are actually socially constructed and ideologically loaded. “Ideology refers to the production of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups”; thus, ideologies are actualized in the way individuals make sense of the world they live in (McLaren 79). Ideologies affect every bit of our lives, but often in ways people do not reflect upon, since people just act “normal” and with “common sense” or think that the ideas and situations they are surrounded by are “natural” and neutral (Yulita 198). But the truth is that what might be seen at first as natural or neutral might actually be entangled with relations of power and hierarchies that either oppress or negate a group or certain individuals that are different whether culturally, sexually, racially or in terms of class; acting normal and with common sense in this sense might be hurtful and dangerous in several ways for multiple people, which brings to the fore the importance of reflecting upon and questioning our society’s ideologies with our students. One way to do this is through critical pedagogy, and to focus on developing critical cultural awareness amongst our students, which can be reachable with the help of literature (Yulita 213). By guiding the students to work closely and engaging with literature and promote personal reflections about it will help them towards awareness raising and towards intercultural competence (Yulita). In the case of Cisneros’s novel and its uses of space, one can do this by focusing on how space functions, as thesis thesis argues, as a tool for social control and how it reflects social inequities with important implications for issues of gender, class, race and migrant experiences. Specific spaces to interpret in the novel could be the domestic spaces and the communal spaces of the street as focused on in the analysis in this essay.

Moreover, as stated in the introduction, the novel goes in line with what is required in the Swedish Agency for Education who emphasize that students must “be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different context and parts of the world” and get the ability to discuss and reflect on these (English 2). Furthermore, the novel pedagogically also fits with the education’s core values as stated by the Swedish Agency for Education which states that the education should foster democratic beliefs and intercultural development (“Gy11”). This is a hard task for any teacher, but to begin to question the social constructions that structure and propound peoples’ lives and to critically
approach social and cultural differences through literature might be a good starting point. Literary discussions provide both teachers and students with a safe space to explore, discuss and question different ideologies and different perspectives of people in our society and in the world.

Finally, the Swedish classrooms consist of students coming from all over the world with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds; as seen in Ryan’s and Sullivan’s articles that have been discussed earlier in this essay, the novel *The House on Mango Street* in this context can be useful for both the privileged and the unprivileged students, as well as for students on different levels. It might therefore be useful for students who do not share the difficulties Esperanza’s community faces, to acknowledge and recognize their own privileges and self-understanding because focusing on space reveals such structures of power. Teaching the novel with a focus on space to disadvantaged students might also be productive because the novel not only exposes the hierarchies but underlines the importance of education to question and change the systematic inequalities. Arguably, the novel *The House on Mango Street* allows all readers to relate and a close reading of it that focuses on space as this thesis does might provide with productive discussions about its ideological and social functions both collectively and individually.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, the representation of space and its multifaceted implications in the novel *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros has been discussed and analyzed. The points of the essay on space have been developed in dialogue with Henri Lefebvre’s theories of social space where he shows how space can function as a means of control, power and domination, but also, how space can open up for a new kind of space, a more just space. A close analysis of the protagonist Esperanza’s reflections on the three migrant characters Mamacita, Rafaela and Sally has aimed to reveal the power dynamics entangled in their social and individual spatial practices and relations. The analysis has added to the existing discussions of the novel by showing how their housing arrangements functions as spaces of oppression, confinement and patriarchal dominance. Furthermore, a focus has been on analyzing instances where the protagonist Esperanza imagines this new alternative and more just space for herself and for her community with relevance for education. All in all, the thesis in the analysis has shown how individuals’ perception of spaces is highly entwined with the more abstract larger constructions of it.
Additionally, this essay has discussed the educational implications of these claims for using Cisneros's novel with a focus on space for upper secondary students. The novel deals with issues of cultural differences, social justice and belonging, which are issues many students can relate to. A focus on space such as the one applied in this analysis, would allow students to reflect upon their own relations to space, as well as upon how power relations and social injustices and inequities in their society are entangled within the larger abstract notion on space. Finally, such a perspective would also allow them to imagine and create an alternative better space, as the protagonist Esperanza.
Primary sources:

Secondary sources:


