

Research Week Abstract

Title – Once Upon a Time on Mango Street

Program of Study – English

Presentation Type – Choose one of the following: Oral Presentation

Subtype – Choose one of the following for poster or oral presentation types: Textual or Investigative

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Abstract: This paper examines how the use of fairytale allusions in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* critiques and recreates standard constructions of female identity. Narrated by the young main character Esperanza, the novel explores the experiences of a variety of Latina women living on Mango Street. As Esperanza retells these stories, she frequently compares these women to fairytale characters, such as Cinderella and Rapunzel. These fairytales often define women as either “angels” or “monsters”: either they are perfect, or they are evil. Furthermore, this perfection for women is associated with dependence and passivity. As the women in the novel become associated with fairytale characters, they conform to this standard for female identity and become the “angels” promoted by fairytales. However, as the women of the novel embrace this construction of female identity, rather than receiving the “happily ever after” promised by fairytales in return for this dependence, taking on this role confines and entraps the women of Mango Street and further defines them as a tool for sexual gratification for men. Furthermore, women like Esperanza who refuse to submit to the passivity promoted by fairytales become “monsters.” In this way, the novel uses fairytales to demonstrate the dangers in defining women in the traditional roles of passivity and dependence. However, at the end of the novel, Esperanza defines herself outside of the binary of either the monster or the angel promoted by fairytales, becoming instead an autonomous yet highly compassionate women. In the end, then, *The House on Mango Street*'s use of fairytale tropes demonstrates the problems of fairytale constructions of female identity, providing an avenue for creating a new conception of

what it means to be a woman.

Christian worldview integration: Contemporary literature has become increasingly concerned with exploring issues of gender as our culture more than ever questions what gender means, whether it is a societal construct, and how or if we should define gender. In order to engage with our culture, it is necessary that we as Christians listen carefully to the questions and answers offered by our culture and articulate thoughtful answers in response. *The House on Mango Street*, as a contemporary classic in its own right and a landmark work in both Latino and feminist literature, deserves special attention from the Christian seeking to understand the nuances of the gender issue. It is this realization that motivated my initial interest in the topic and established my focus on understanding what Cisneros herself intended to communicate about her own experiences and understanding of gender through her novel. Furthermore, Cisneros' response of defining women beyond passivity represents a profoundly biblical answer to what a woman should be. In Scripture, rather than seeing a woman as dependent upon men, we often see women taking the lead as they faithfully serve both God and others. Thus, understanding Cisneros' alternative construction of female identity allows Christians to better understand and articulate a biblical ideal for womanhood. Outside of the Christian world, grasping Cisneros' work also promotes a deepening understanding of cultural questions about gender and can aid skeptics in sympathizing with a feminist perspective: in the world of Mango Street, Latina women deal with real injustices that require feminist action as well as new theory that identifies what it means to be a woman. Thus, my research both engages with culturally relevant questions and points to a biblical answer for female identity.