Youth and Society in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*

Bachelor’s Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: Mgr. Martina Horáková, Ph. D.

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author’s signature
I would like to thank Mgr. Martina Horáková, PhD.
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1. Introduction

This thesis examines and compares *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by Jerome David Salinger and *The House on Mango Street* (1984) by Sandra Cisneros. On the first sight, these two pieces of literature seem utterly different: *The Catcher in the Rye*, set in the late forties, is a story told by Holden Caulfield, a depressed, alienated 16-year-old boy of upper-middle-class origin who strongly disapproves of the world around him and desperately tries to escape the falsity and arrogance that surrounds him. *The House on Mango Street*, which is often considered a feminist novel (Saldivar-Hull 87; Wissman 159; Daniels 127), is a collection of poetic short stories about a Mexican American girl, Esperanza Cordero, who is growing up in the suburbs of Chicago during the early sixties. Yet, this analysis suggests that these two novels share a number of common features and that the experience of the main characters is not as different as it appears. Both Holden and Esperanza challenge their gender roles; they unsuccessfully seek guidance within their peer group or family; both plan to run away or at least long to be alone. Another view that they share is the opinion on class division and human relationships, especially their perception of love, sex and death. Even though there are significant differences between the main characters, such as gender and social and ethnic background, the thesis argues that both Holden and Esperanza have quite similar experience of “growing up” and that factors such as their gender or society in which they live do not make a considerable difference between their perception of adolescence.

In the first part of this thesis, I try to find out whether these two novels can be somehow linked with each other through the features of Bildungsroman that they both contain. Especially the position of *The Catcher in the Rye* within the genre of Bildungsroman is often challenged. The first section deals with the question whether
Holden and Esperanza should be approached as Bildungsroman characters and to what extent their development embraces the traditional conception of Bildungsroman.

The work then goes on to compare Holden’s perception of his life and Esperanza’s view of her life and analyse the similarities and differences in their behaviour and attitudes. The first theme that is examined is gender roles, stereotypes connected to them and the characters’ opposition to them. Then, the thesis focuses on the socio-economic status of Holden and Esperanza and shows that even though the characters come from strikingly different surroundings, neither of them is comfortable with their position within the class structure. Next discussed theme is the relationships between the characters and their parents and siblings, for the family members are important for both Holden and Esperanza, even though the reasons and manifestations of their importance are different. Then, the focus moves to the presence of friends and potential role models and their usefulness to the main characters. Following theme is Holden’s and Esperanza’s perceptions of love, sex and death. The work interprets the ways in which the two young people experience their first romantic encounters, their view on the matters of sex and also how Holden and Esperanza cope with death. This subsection also shows that these three themes are interconnected for both Holden and Esperanza. The final part of the chapter is focused on the motives of quest and escape, which resonate quite strongly through both novels.

The aim of the analysis is to demonstrate that the perception of the adolescent life of Holden and Esperanza and the strategies they use in order to cope with their problems do not considerably differ despite the substantial differences between the lives of the two characters.
2. Bildungsroman and Its Traces in the Works of Salinger and Cisneros

Both The Catcher in the Rye and The House on Mango Street are often classified as “Bildungsromans” or “coming-of-age novels”. This chapter examines the meaning of these terms and tries to find out whether these novels fulfil the conditions of this genre.

Bildungsroman, a German word meaning a “formation novel”, is usually defined as “a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character” (“Bildungsroman,” def. 1) or as “a novel describing the passage of an adolescent into adulthood” (Iversen 22). However, literary scholars still struggle to agree on “[h]ow the term should be defined, whether such a genre in fact exists, and where, and whether or not it is still being written” (Iversen 9). Tobias Boes describes the controversy as “genre wars”:

“The term is sometimes – especially within English departments – used so broadly that seemingly any novel ... might be subsumed by it. Specialists of German literature, on the other hand, have shown an almost masochistic glee in decimating their own canon, on occasion disqualifying even such seemingly incontestable examples [of Bildungsroman] as Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship from its ranks” (230).

This Goethe’s novel that was published in 1796 is usually considered to be one of the first Bildungsroman ever written and an undisputed classic of the genre. However, the genre does not end with the nineteenth century which is generally considered the golden age of Bildungsroman, with canonical texts such as The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce or The Magic Mountain by Thomas Mann (Boes 231). After World War II, and especially after “the rise of feminist, post-colonial and minority studies” in the sixties (Boes 231), the Bildungsroman was considerably transformed and
its definition was quite broadened. According to Boes, this shift in the perception of Bildungsroman can be seen in *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* edited by Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, in which they show how a female perspective in the works by Kate Chopin, George Eliot and other female authors have been excluded from the Bildugsroman genre by literary scholars, even though they most definitely belong to the tradition of coming-of-age novels (Boes 234). As Boes points out, “this anthology is perhaps the first major scholarly work on the Bildungsroman to privilege the twentieth over the nineteenth century, devoting two thirds of its pages to case studies of modernist and contemporary texts, including works by Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys, and Clarice Lispector” (234). *The Voyage In* also ushered in the shift of the themes of the Bildungsroman; the formation is still the most important topic of coming-of-age novels, but, at the same time, most Bildungsromans written after 1980 belong to feminist, minority or post-colonial writing, which is quite contrary to the Bildungsroman as it was perceived until the first half of the twentieth century. Esther Labovitz explains this change of the Bildungsroman genre with the shift within the society:

> When cultural and social structures appeared to support women’s struggle for independence, to go out into the world, engage in careers, in self-discovery and fulfilment, the heroine in fiction began to reflect these changes. Further, new areas of study about the “concerns and experience of women” were first required to remedy the gap in knowledge about the female youth, about concepts of womanhood and adulthood. (7)

It is highly plausible that, just as the widespread independence of women helped to establish the female Bildungsroman, the liberation of colonies and the struggle for human rights were among the causes of the widespread use of the ethnic variety of
Bildungsroman. The focus on minority themes brings another variation in the traditional features of coming-of-age novels. As Maria Helena Lima argues in her analysis of Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, “while the traditional Bildungsroman requires a constructed harmony between external and internal factor, to provide, according to Franco Moretti, ‘a homeland to the individual’, Kincaid’s novel of development exposes the impossibility of such a fictional harmony” (860). This change in determining what the Bildungsroman is and what it is not, which happened in the course of the last century, is very important for the analysis of both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The House on Mango Street*, for at the end of these two novels, the main characters come to an understanding that the harmony they believed in and looked for in their world is indeed impossible. The traditional Bildungsroman hero or heroine comes to terms with the world around him or her at the end of his or her story; nevertheless, as has been stated above, both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The House on Mango Street* are usually considered as coming-of-age novels. In the following sections, I will discuss the features of the Bildungsroman that can be identified in these two books.

2.1 *The Catcher in the Rye*

In their influential study “J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff”, Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr. claim that “*The Catcher in the Rye* belongs to an ancient and honourable narrative tradition, perhaps the most profound in western fiction [...] This, of course, is the tradition of the Quest” (129). While the authors distinguish between two types of quest, they also suggest that “Holden seems to be engaged in both sorts of quests at once: he needs to go home and he needs to leave it [...] his tragedy is that he has nowhere to go” (130). Holden wants to leave the corrupt and “phony” world he lives in, but at the same time he longs for a non-existent world
full of love, which is, sadly, nowhere to be found. It is therefore a question whether The Catcher in the Rye can be categorized as a Bildungsroman or not. While the motif of the quest is undoubtedly an important feature of almost any coming-of-age novel, the absence of the final destination of Holden’s quest certainly does not belong to the traditional Bildungsroman features. A study conducted by Anniken Iversen shows that there is very little of the traditional coming-of-age novel in the Catcher in the Rye.

Iversen has constructed the so-called Bildungsroman Index (BRI), which she uses to assess the extent to which various works of literature share their features with an ideal coming-of-age novel. The analysed books were given a certain number of points for each of the 96 features of the Bildungsroman Index (Iversen 54). BRI features are divided into nine sections: first, Iversen analyses the narrative perspective and mode; then, she focuses on the characterization of the protagonist; the third feature of the BRI is the characterization and function of secondary characters; the fourth feature consists of story elements affecting protagonist; the fifth one encompasses story elements affecting secondary characters; the sixth feature of the BRI is the setting of the novel, while the seventh feature deals with its plot and structure; the eighth feature evaluates the so-called generic signals, and, finally, the last section of the BRI examines the themes and motifs (Iversen 55-63). Theoretically, a novel can gain 0-146 points.

In this scheme, The Catcher in the Rye scores 57 points, the smallest number of points from all the analysed novels (Iversen 80, Table 17). Iversen claims that it therefore should be “better viewed as a reaction to the Bildungsroman than as part of the tradition” (231). Iversen acknowledges that there are characters and situations in the story that can resonate with the Bildungsroman’s traditional features, nevertheless, they “fail to do so” (235). Probably the most important feature that differs The Catcher in the Rye from coming-of-age novels as Iversen understands them is the lack
of positive personal impact of the quest on the hero: “although Holden moves about in the world and has various experiences, these are negative, if not ironic, versions of what we find in [the traditional Bildungsroman]” (236). These experiences logically result in Holden not finding his place in the society, what would be a traditional ending of the Bildungsroman. In addition, Iversen points out that

[for readers siding with Holden against society, accommodation – finding one’s place in society – would be a disappointment, or even a betrayal of the values of the novel. ... If Holden was to find his place in or adapt to such a society, it would be the equivalent of moral suicide. (238)

According to the BRI, The Catcher in the Rye cannot therefore be seen as a case of the traditional Bildungsroman. Nevertheless, the novel has some themes in common with the Bildungsroman and is often claimed to be the prominent exemplar of the American coming-of-age novel by such authors as Karen Tolchin, who claims that the novel has a “preeminent stature among American Bildungsromane” and that “critics and instructors routinely take the novel as the example par excellence of the American coming-of-age novel” (40). Another literary scholar who argues that The Catcher in the Rye is undoubtedly a Bildungsroman is Kenneth Millard, who uses the novel as an example of Bildungsroman in his book Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction (5). Perhaps the most conclusive argument for including The Catcher in the Rye among formation novels is the definition of Bildungsroman used in Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s influential work Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding. Buckley states that Bildungsroman is a novel that contains themes such as “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18). It is clear that all these themes can be found in The Catcher in the Rye and the novel can
therefore be seen as a part of Bildungsroman genre, even though it may not satisfy all the criteria of a stricter definition of Bildungsroman, such as the one informing the BRI.

2.2 The House on Mango Street

The House on Mango Street is in quite a similar position as The Catcher in the Rye. Cisneros’s book is often classified as Bildungsroman; for example, Julián Olivares claims that “The House on Mango Street is a book about growing up, what critics call a Bildungsroman” (209). Yet, Olivares defines Bildungsroman quite differently from Iversen cited above; while Iversen’s definition is based on European traditionalist view of the genre, Olivares defines the contemporary, post-1960’s American Bildungsroman, in the following way:

[the] genre is cultivated commonly in the United States by emerging writers, often first- or second-generation immigrants, and especially within literatures emerging around the periphery of a dominant society. It offers the advantage of a first-person narration that becomes the basis for the expression of subjectivity; the protagonist relates his or her experiences in the growth from childhood to maturity, the latter determined by the dialectic with culture and society. The often simplistic or naive narration proper to a child's perspective is conducive to an innocent but critical view of society and, in the case of Mango Street, to the formation of a counterdiscourse. (209)

Olivares therefore takes into account very few features that are traditionally used to distinguish the Bildungsroman from other genres. Unlike Iversen, Olivares does not mention any secondary characters important for the Bildungsroman. Maria Karafilis also argues that The House on Mango Street is a novel of formation, yet she
distinguishes between the traditional Bildungsroman (as defined, for example, by Iversen) and the modified Bildungsroman, which is written mainly by female and/or minority writers: “Many women writers of colour, both ethnic American and postcolonial, use the Bildungsroman precisely to ‘affirm and assert’ the complex subjectivities of their characters and, by extension, themselves. Such writers have adopted and radically revised the classical Bildungsroman to suit their purposes of narrating the development of a personal identity and sense of self” (63-64). Moreover, Karafilis claims that “while appropriating and revising many elements of the classical Bildungsroman, *The House on Mango Street* ultimately traces the satisfying development of a young woman who not only matures but also attains harmony and a greater appreciation and understanding of her surrounding society” (65). Karafilis argues that in *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros modifies three important features of Bildungsroman: she shifts the focus from an individual to community, the story is not traditionally linear but fragmented and she criticizes the values and goals of majority American society that tolerates and empowers the exclusion of those less privileged – non-white and poor people (66).

Indeed, the individualism of traditional Bildungsromans is replaced by a more communal sense of the main character’s coming of age in Cisneros’ novel. Even though the readers can see that Esperanza is growing up and changing in the course of the novel, the majority of the stories of which the book is composed is not about Esperanza, but about her friends, family, and other people from the Mango Street and its surroundings. Karafilis points out that even the vignettes whose names signify that they will be primarily about Esperanza, such as “My Name”, tell the story of someone else – in the case of “My Name”, it is Esperanza’s grandmother. Yet Esperanza learns from this story and the experience forms her in some way (Karafilis 66).
Esperanza’s story is not told in a linear fashion, as it is usual for traditional coming-of-age novels. Instead, it is arranged as a set of short stories or “vignettes”, as Cisneros herself calls them (“The Softly Insistent” 14-15). The vignettes are not linked together; they can be read individually or all at once. Cisneros explains the structure of her book with these words: “I wanted to write a series of stories that you could open up at any point. You didn’t have to know anything before or after and you would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace” (qtd. in Jusawalla and Dasenbrock 305).

The reasons why *The House on Mango Street* consists of these vignettes can be multiple: they help achieve the simplicity of language that gives the impression that the book is indeed narrated by a child. However, as Stella Bolaki points out, this is not the only purpose the vignettes serve: “the function of such technique is not merely to imitate the voice of a child but also to turn the text into a matrix of constant crossings” (104). These “constant crossings” illustrate the growing up of a Chicana girl in patriarchal white society and many influences from various (mostly female) role models.

Another important aspect in which *The House on Mango Street* differs from traditional Bildungsromans is the ending. A traditional hero or heroine of a coming-of-age novel usually ends up leaving his or her original surroundings and finding a place in the new environment. According to Franco Moretti, the traditional Bildungsroman ends when “as ‘a free individual,’ not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as one’s own” (16). These statements about the Bildungsroman ending are only partly true for the heroine of the book, Esperanza. She realises that even if she leaves her community, she always has to “come back” (Cisneros, *Mango Street* 105), for the Mango Street lives within her. Esperanza
therefore cannot find herself by fleeing from her Chicano neighbourhood, and she is therefore in a similar position to Holden’s in *The Catcher in the Rye*, who cannot ease his pain by escaping New York and his family. It is of course questionable whether this is a voluntary decision or if Esperanza is forced to abandon the possibility of her escape by circumstances and whether she starts to perceive the social norms as her own, as a heroine of the traditional Bildungsroman should. It is unlikely that by staying in the Mango Street Esperanza abandons everything she has learned in the course of the novel. By her final understanding that she always has to come back, Esperanza shows that the tradition of the “American dream” which encompasses the freedom of movement is not only impossible for her, but also dangerous for her community.
3. The Society versus the Self: Holden’s and Esperanza’s Coming of Age

As has been stated above, The Catcher in the Rye and The House on Mango Street differ in many aspects. Among the most visible differences are the structure of the books and language that is used in them; the characters do not share their gender, the area they live in, their socio-economic status, or their ethnicity. Moreover, considerable differences can be found in the relationships the main protagonists have with their parents and siblings, in their attitude towards their friends and peers and also in the role models they choose and/or reject in the course of the book. However, even though the differences listed above are undisputable, the influence they have on the protagonists’ behaviour is not so unambiguous. This chapter focuses on the differences between the protagonists of The Catcher in the Rye and The House on Mango Street and examine the impact of these differences on the characters’ behaviour and opinions.

3.1 Attitudes to Gender Roles and Stereotypes

Holden Caulfield is a 16-year-old, white, upper-middle-class boy from New York. Therefore, as a white, wealthy, male American, he is a member of the most privileged group in the world at that time. Even though the book was written and published long before the rise of the second-wave feminism, the theme of gender is quite an important part of the narrative. Holden is clearly aware of gender roles, which is manifested when he asks his date, Sally, to go away with him and live in “a cabin in the woods” (Salinger 132): “when the dough runs out, I could get a job somewhere ... and, later on, we could get married or something. I could chop all our wood in the wintertime and all” (Salinger 132). This suggests that Holden at times conforms to traditional roles of femininity and masculinity, such as the man as the only breadwinner
in the family. He also sometimes makes comments that seem sexist or at least objectifying – for example, while waiting for Sally, he watches “the girls ... waiting for their dates to show up. Girls with their legs crossed, girls with their legs not crossed, girls with terrific legs, girls with lousy legs ... It was really nice sightseeing, if you know what I mean” (Salinger 123). However, Holden’s attitude to traditional gender roles is much more complex than these passages may suggest. His vision of life with Sally in the woods can also be seen as an expression of Holden’s need of human contact and love (the subject of love and loneliness will be analysed in the next chapter). Even though Holden apparently perceives the waiting girls as sexual objects, he also thinks about them as about human beings; he feels sorry for them, because “most of them would probably marry dopey guys”, which is “sort of depressing” (Salinger 123).

Moreover, Clive Baldwin points out that “while [Holden] watches and judges the young women, he is in fact identified with them: he too is sitting and waiting for his date, just as they are“ (110). Therefore, even though some of his claims seem to be sexist, he shows that he can not only identify with women, but he perhaps inclines towards femininity rather than masculinity: “while Holden may appear to hold conventional attitudes to women, his identification with the feminine expresses an ambivalent attitude to the dominant model of masculinity” (Baldwin 110). This Baldwin’s argument is supported by Holden’s opinions and actions considering traditional manifestations of masculinity – aggressiveness and sexual activity.

As far as aggressive behaviour is concerned, Holden, that got into a fight only twice in his life and lost both those fights, considers himself “a pacifist” (Salinger 46) He is beaten up twice in the course of the book; every time, he refuses to attack in any other way than verbally; and every time, the violence breaks out because of sex. The first fight takes place in Pencey, where Holden, thinking that his roommate
Stradlater had sex with Holden’s platonic love, provokes him until Stradlater knocks him out. The second fight happens after Holden refuses to sleep with a prostitute in New York and does not pay her. She calls her pimp, Maurice, and he attacks Holden and steals his money. The aggressive connotations of sex are repulsive for Holden – “aggression is an extremely negative quality to Holden” (Rosen 555). Even though he has several possibilities to have sex, he remains a virgin, possibly because of his non-aggressiveness: “The thing is, most of the time when you’re coming pretty close to doing it with a girl ... she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don’t. I can’t help it” (Salinger 92). That is another example of Holden’s identification with women – instead of doing what he wants and losing his virginity, he is considerate of the feelings of the girl and he stops when she asks him to, which is not common for the boys in his age. Therefore, by not standing up to the stereotypes of masculinity and identifying himself rather with femininity, Holden actively undermines the views of gender roles that were common in his times.

The heroine and the narrator of *The House on Mango Street* is a 12-year-old Esperanza Cordero who is attending a primary school at the outskirts of Chicago. As she gets older and more experienced in the course of the novel, she gradually becomes aware of the possibilities and limitations that come with being a Chicana woman and both her life and the way she sees the world around her is thoroughly affected by her gender and the way she approaches her womanhood. In one of the first vignettes, Esperanza claims that “boys and girls live in separate worlds” (Cisneros 8). This is very true, especially for the Chicano community, where the “ideal” of man is a macho breadwinner, while an “ideal” woman should either devote herself to the family (like Esperanza’s mother) or to her husband (like Esperanza’s friend Sally).
Esperanza is very well aware of what it means to be a woman in her culture; she herself claims that “the Mexicans don’t like their women strong” (Cisneros, Mango Street 11 – 12). She understands that being female within her community very often means being a victim. Even her grandmother, “a wild horse of a woman” (Cisneros, Mango Street 12), was eventually tamed by Esperanza’s grandfather. Her mother, her friends, her neighbours – they are all forced to abandon their own dreams and ambitions in order to become wives, mothers and daughters. This feature of Mango Street women is pointed out by Jacqueline Doyle: “Most of the women yearn for different endings” (9). Doyle also stresses the fact that almost all women in the novel are being isolated from the rest of the people living on Mango Street, so when they are not taking care of their children and husbands, they look from the window or sit on the porch all day, without a possibility to go somewhere else (8).

However, Esperanza also learns that becoming an isolated victim of the patriarchal society is not the only possible future for her. As Helen Grice argues, “if female sexuality is often figured as a burden in the text, then it sometimes also offers a possible means of manipulating and controlling patriarchal conditions” (234). Esperanza becomes aware of this possibility of using sexuality in her favour in the vignette called “Hips”, when she says: “You gotta be able to know with hips when you get them” (50). Even though she is theoretically aware of the power of womanhood, Esperanza, at the same time, describes herself as “an ugly daughter” and “the one nobody comes for” (88). She would like to be “beautiful and cruel” as a movie heroine: “She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (89). Esperanza also wants to be powerful; she has decided “not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (88). Because she sees herself as ugly, she finds her own
way of attaining power that differs from the movies – her “quiet war”: “I am the one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (89). As Maria Szadziuk puts it, “the awareness that [Esperanza] does not fit the culture's feminine standards is related to her conscious appropriation of the ‘masculine’ models of behaviour” (116).

To sum up, while it may seem that Holden passively acquires and endorses the gender roles that are typical for his culture, time and society and Esperanza actively stands up to the roles she should perform as a Mexican American woman, the evidence above suggests that as far as gender roles are concerned, both Holden and Esperanza do not behave according to the rules of their communities and actively challenge the gender stereotypes of their periods. Holden remains non-aggressive and sexually inactive, while Esperanza tries to become an active and articulate person.

3.2 Socio-economic Status

As mentioned earlier, Holden belongs to the upper-middle class. His father is a New York based lawyer, his brother D.B. is a writer who became a successful Hollywood screenwriter. However, even though his financial situation is more than satisfactory and “his weekly allowance would probably feed a poor family for a month” (Finkelstein 219-220), Holden is not happy about it. He particularly disagrees with his brother’s career choice that means abandon his literary ambitions for wealth. The first piece of information that he gives about D.B. is that “he used to be just a regular writer [...] now he’s out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute” (Salinger 1-2). He is aware of undeserved privileges the wealthy people have and does not agree with them. Even though his four days in New York “are a bleak summary of the standard methods of purchasing a ‘good time’; visiting a night club, getting drunk at a bar, having
a prostitute in a hotel room supplied by an elevator-operator pimp, trying to pick a girl in a dance hall, seeing a Broadway ‘hit’” (Finkelstein 221), Holden does not find any consolation in these pastimes. The middle-class people he meets at clubs and bars are “mostly ... prep school jerks and college jerks” (Salinger 83) and they “make him feel depressed and lousy” (Salinger 84); he refuses to sleep with the prostitute just to be beaten and robbed by her and her pimp from the elevator; he is not really interested in the girl he tries to pick up; he does not like the musical show and its audience. Therefore, the money he has and the possibilities they open for him do not make him a happier, more well-balanced person.

As Ohman and Ohman claim, “the novel’s critique of class distinction may be found, not just between the lines of Holden’s account, but in some of his most explicit comments on what’s awry in this world” (27). Holden even claims that a snobbish headmaster, being smug to worse-off parents of his students, was the reason he left his former school, Elkton Hills:

On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody’s parents [...] He’d be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. [...] if a boy’s mother was sort of fat or corny looking or something, and if somebody’s father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he’d go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else’s parents. I can’t stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. (Salinger 14)

Holden’s angry reaction to Haas’ behaviour shows that Holden is very sensitive to injustice, especially when it is based on class differences. Hass’ hypocritical manners
and his servility to those better off than him are the features of the adult world that Holden wants to avoid at all costs.

Another piece of evidence showing that Holden is uncomfortable with class division can be found in his memories of his former roommate, Dick Slagle. Slagle did not come from a family as rich as Holden’s, so he has “these inexpensive suitcases”, while Holden had suitcases that “were made of genuine cowhide and all that crap” (Salinger 108). Because Holden did not want his roommate to feel bad about it, he hid his expensive suitcases under the bed, only to find out that Slagle wanted them to be seen. “The reason he did it, it took me a while to find out, was because he wanted people to think my bags were his” (Salinger 108). Even though Holden claims that he misses Slagle sometimes because he “had a good sense of humor”, he also admits that “it’s really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs” (Salinger 109). Holden is undoubtedly a member of a highly privileged group, but he does not enjoy his position, for he can sense the envy of other people, such as Slagle, and he is aware of the fact that he did not do anything to deserve this status. He is unhappy and depressed, not only in spite of all his money, but partly also because of it. Apart from trying not to show off his family’s wealth, Holden manifests his opposition towards the economic and social class division by leaving; he leaves three schools because of their snobbery. He is disgusted with “phony” New York society and plans to escape to the wilderness.

Esperanza is in a very different position. She lives in a very poor Chicano neighbourhood in the outskirts of Chicago, her father is a manual worker and her family lives in a shabby house that is too small and is slowly falling down. After depicting the house, Esperanza remembers how a nun from her school once asked her where she lived.
Where do you live? she asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live there?

The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I live there. I nodded.

(Cisneros, Mango Street 5)

The nun’s disbelief and potential pity because of the state of the house makes Esperanza realise the class distinction between her and the nun. She does not live in the same world as her school teacher; Esperanza lives there, not here. She is ashamed of her otherness, but there is nothing she can do about it. Yet she knows that people in the neighbourhood are in the same position as she is; when her friend’s cousin rides a luxurious new car on their streets, it soon turns out that he has stolen it (Cisneros, Mango Street 24). While Esperanza is certainly not happy with the situation, she is aware of the fact that the house she lives in will hardly change: “For the time being, Mama says. For the time being, says Papa. But I know how things go” (Cisneros, Mango Street 5).

Thus, while Holden is a member of the privileged class, both because his economic status and his ethnicity, Esperanza finds herself on quite the opposite side of the social spectrum for exactly the same reasons. Both Holden and Esperanza are unhappy because of their situation; Holden because of the envy of others, Esperanza because of the disdain of others. Each of them has a different strategy of coping with their socio-economic niveau: Holden tries to conceal his wealth and dreams of leaving the class-divided society, while Esperanza tries to move up the social ladder by eating in the school canteen and finding a job. Nevertheless, her failure to be included in the majority society is significant both for her and the novel.
3.3 Relationships with Parents and Siblings

Holden’s parents are not very much present in his life – except for its material part. His father is completely absent from the novel and his mother only appears once, and talks only to his sister Phoebe while Holden is hidden in the closet. The fact that it is impossible for Holden to find guidance and understanding with his mother and father can be explained by Holden’s despise toward the adult world: “He feels estranged from his elders because the world is theirs, one they have shaped and that the does not want to enter” (Finkelstein 222). Holden is lost and needs advice. Because he cannot seek the help of his parents, he has to look elsewhere.

One of his possible mentors and positive role models could be his brother D.B., who used to be “a terrific writer” (Salinger 1) and Holden clearly loves his early work. However, the times have changed for D.B.: “D.B. has been Holden’s idol; but the idol is crumbling, may even have crumbled, for D.B. has become a movie writer” (Oldsey 210). At the time of the novel, D.B. lives in Hollywood, writing screenplays for popular films. Even though D.B. is rich and famous, Holden strongly disapproves of his career choices and he views D.B. as a sellout, “a prostitute” (Salinger 2).

His younger brother Allie, with whom Holden obviously had a strong connection, died when Holden was twelve. This deeply affected Holden in many ways and in some ways he still did not recover from the loss. Michael Cowan even suggests that “Holden on some symbolic level seems to feel guilty about Allie’s death” (48). Having died before he reached puberty, Allie will never go through the changes that Holden is going through and that D.B. already went through. Allie symbolises the purity of childhood that starts to be unreachable for Holden – “he stands for whatever is most authentic in Holden’s life” (Rowe 80). When Holden has a panic attack and is afraid of disappearing while walking on the Fifth Avenue, he begs Allie to save him; he starts
a mantra-like prayer to his dead brother: “Allie, don’t let me disappear. Allie, don’t let me disappear. Allie, don’t let me disappear. Please, Allie” (Salinger 198). Allie is not only a spiritual power for Holden, but also his beloved brother. When Holden’s sister, Phoebe, asks him what he likes, Holden says “Allie. I like Allie” (Salinger 171). When Phoebe reminds him that Allie is dead, Holden reacts angrily: “Just because somebody’s dead, you just don’t stop liking them, for God’s sake – especially if they were about a thousand times nicer than the people you know that’re alive and all” (Salinger 171). Holden’s little sister takes Holden back into the bleak reality, even though he does not like it.

Phoebe’s character is quite significant for the novel – after Allie, she is probably the only person that Holden trusts and she is probably the only character that is capable of having a proper, not “phony” conversation with Holden. And even though she is just nine years old and probably not able to understand everything Holden tells her, in the end she is the reason why he does not run away from home. The cause of this might be that she is as pure and innocent as Allie was and she does not fit in the cruel adult world. In order to protect her purity, Holden decides to stay with her.

In The House on Mango Street, family is one of the central topics. It is obvious that Esperanza loves her parents, especially her mother, who is one of the most visible role models for Esperanza. In the vignette called “Hairs” (Cisneros, Mango Street 7), in which Esperanza recalls the morning ritual of crawling into her parents’ bed, Esperanza’s mother is depicted as a caring figure, an embodiment of security, safety and stability. It is also the mother who encourages Esperanza to study and to be as independent as possible: “Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. [...] Got to take care all your own, she says shaking her head” (Cisneros, Mango Street 91). She also advises Esperanza not to be superficial like she was at her age: “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” (Cisneros, Mango Street 91). In Esperanza’s family, it is clearly the mother that takes care of the family, whereas her father is the breadwinner. His work is probably quite demanding – Esperanza describes him as “my Papa, his thick hands and thick shoes, who wakes up tired in the dark, who combs his hair with water, drinks his coffee, and is gone before we wake” (Cisneros, Mango Street 57). Calling his hands and shoes “thick” points out that he works manually and because he “is gone before we wake”, he is not mentioned very often in the course of the novel, for he is not present in Esperanza’s life as much as her mother, who is always at home. However, Thomas Matchie points out that “Esperanza actually loves her father, though as with Holden [Caulfield]’s he is virtually absent from the narrative” (69). The proof that Esperanza’s father is an important figure for her occurs when he confides to her that his father, Esperanza’s grandfather, died. The fact that Esperanza is the first person in the family that is told the news shows three important things about the relationship of Esperanza and her father: the first being that until that moment, he did not show his emotions in front of her, as Esperanza admits: “I have never seen Papa cry” (Cisneros 56). The second important feature of the relationship of Esperanza and her father is that he sees her as a responsible individual: “Because I am the oldest, my father had told me first, and now it is my turn to tell the others” (Cisneros 56). And finally, even though this situation is completely new for Esperanza, she is eager to console her father (as well as herself) the best way she can, showing him her love: “I hold Papa in my arms. I hold and hold and hold him” (Cisneros 57).

As for her siblings, Esperanza does not mention her brothers very often – probably because they do not talk to her and her sisters outside the house. Of all her
brothers and sisters, she has the closest relationship with her younger sister Nenny, although it is not always a loving relationship – sometimes, Nenny is more a burden for Esperanza than a partner: “Nenny is too young to be my friend. She’s just my sister and that was not my fault... she is my responsibility” (Cisneros, *Mango Street* 9). Because Esperanza’s mother has responsibilities around the house and her father has to work, it is Esperanza’s duty as an older sister to take care about Nenny. However, this responsibility affects the relationship of the sisters; while Esperanza wants a friend who would be her equal and would understand her problems, she has to babysit her baby sister instead. This involuntary mothering role of Esperanza may also be one of the reasons why she does not want a family of her own and pursues her individuality instead.

Marcienne Rocard claims that one of the features of Chicana literature is that it is closely focused on “human relationships between generations” (57). This is true in the case of *The House on Mango Street*: Esperanza’s relationship with her parents is very important for her and her mother is an influential role model for Esperanza, while Holden’s parents are virtually absent from his narrative. The situation is quite opposite with the brothers and sisters of these two characters: even though Esperanza has more siblings than Holden does and she spends much more time with them, particularly with her sister Nenny, she does not see her siblings as partners or role models, which is different from how Holden approaches Allie and Phoebe and probably used to approach D.B. Being the oldest child in the family, Esperanza views her brothers and sisters more as a burden, while Holden approaches his siblings as ideals.
3.4 Friends, Peers, Role Models

Holden is quite a lonely boy – he does not have many friends. However, it is mostly by choice; in school, he feels like he is surrounded by “phonies”. His roommate, Stradlater, is a poser, “a secret slob”: good looking and charming, but with off-putting personal habits and poor hygiene (Salinger 27). He only uses Holden to borrow his things and get his homework done. Moreover, he has an image of a great seducer and Holden finds out that Stradlater, “a very sexy bastard” (Salinger 32), has a date with Jane Gallagher, a girl that Holden knows and possibly is somehow still interested in her. After Stardlater comes back from the date, “full of complacency about Holden’s girl and of contempt for Holden’s essay” (Geismar 196), Holden provokes him into a fight in which Stradlater breaks his nose. This is the last straw for Holden – after this incident, he leaves Pencey, full of people that could be his friends but are not, for New York.

As pointed out above, Holden seeks help. Even though his parents are unable to help him in any other that financial aspect of his life, there are other figures in Holden’s narrative that could function as fatherly characters, especially two of his teachers – Spencer, Holden’s History teacher at Pencey Prep, and Mr. Antolini, who used to teach Holden at Elkton Hills. However, Holden gets gradually disappointed by both these characters. He comes to visit Spencer before the incident with Stradlater, because the old teacher wants to see him. However, while he pretends that he is interested in Holden, Spencer only uses the visit to talk about Holden’s substandard knowledge of history – he sadistically reads out loud Holden’s horrible essay about Egyptians, even though Holden asks him not to do so (Salinger 11). Spencer is not a fatherly figure to Holden – instead, he is an old, self-absorbed narcissist. The only advice he gives to Holden is an overused and meaningless phrase that “life is a game
that one plays according to the rules” (Salinger 8), which does not help Holden with any of his problems.

Mr. Antolini, to whom Holden goes after visiting Phoebe in New York, has a much better position in Holden’s eyes, which is confirmed by the fact that, while the history teacher is called “Spencer” or “old Spencer” during the novel, this character is always called “Mr. Antolini”. It also seems that he can be the saviour Holden is looking for. Mr. Antolini senses that Holden is “riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall ... a special kind of fall, horrible kind. The man falling isn’t permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling” (Salinger 186-187) and he tries to help him. He urges Holden to stay in school and not to give up – according to Mr. Antolini, “the mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one” (Salinger 188). However, Mr. Antolini’s effort to save Holden comes flat for two reasons – the first being that Holden is “too damn tired” (Salinger 188) to pay attention to his words. The second and fatal reason appears after Holden falls asleep – he suddenly wakes up to find out that Mr. Antolini is touching him: “he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head” (Salinger 192). All Antolini’s advice goes in vain - “whatever consolation there may have been in [Antolini’s] message is destroyed” (Galloway 143). Scared and disgusted, Holden hastily leaves Mr. Antolini’s apartment after this episode.

Even though Holden meets persons outside his family that may seem fit to save him or at least help him or be close to him, each one of them pushes him deeper into despair by using Holden only for their own needs. Stradlater uses him to look as a stylish man (by borrowing Holden’s jacket) and a good student (by making Holden write a composition for him), but does not seem interested in Holden as a person.
Spencer claims that he wants to help Holden, but he just uses Holden’s visit for ridiculing Holden’s knowledge of history and justifying the bad grade he gave him. And finally, Mr. Antolini, the one who probably has the biggest potential to save Holden, inappropriately touches him when he sleeps and thus violates his trust.

When compared to Holden, Esperanza’s possible role models seem quite different. Because, as Esperanza points out, “girls and boys live in separate worlds” (Cisneros 8), almost all her friends and all role models are female. Nevertheless, the difference is not as significant as it seems. Esperanza’s friends and role models can be divided into two groups: weak role-models, such as her neighbours Minerva, Rosa and Marin, and seemingly strong role-models, such as her mother and grandmother and her friends Sally and Alicia.

The weak role models are those girls and women who are passive and victimized, usually by men in their family, and they do not have any possibility to free themselves. Esperanza is very well aware of the fact that “she may end up like the lady down the street who is homesick for her lost Puerto Rican ‘pink house’ (Cisneros, Mango Street 77), ... or like Rosa Vargas and Minerva, whose husbands left them alone with a house full of kids” (Corson Carter 198). Marin, another Esperanza’s neighbour, may seem as an independent young girl – she is a bit older and much more experienced than Esperanza:

She is the one who told us how Davey the Baby’s sister got pregnant and what cream is best for taking off moustache hair and if you count the white flecks on your fingernails you can know how many boys are thinking of you and lots of other things I can’t remember now. (Cisneros, Mango Street 31)

However, Marin stays inside the house almost all the time – she lives with her aunt’s family and her aunt is not happy with her going out: “We never see Marin until her aunt
comes home and even then she can only stay out in front” (31). Marin dreams about change, but she is not actively working on it – she is just waiting for something to happen or for someone to come and rescue her: “She’s going to get a real job downtown because that’s where the best jobs are, since you ... can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away“ (31). However, this dream of hers eventually does not come true – she has to go back to Puerto Rico because she is “too much trouble” (Cisneros, Mango Street 31). These women from Mango Street, even though they are unhappy with their situation, do not do anything to actively change it; instead, they conform to the will of their husbands or families.

Esperanza’s mother could be a good role model for her daughter. She is caring, loving, and smart. However, Esperanza eventually understands that her mother lives an isolated life and that she never lived up to her potential. “She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She used to draw when she had time. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn’t know which subway train to take to get downtown” (Cisneros, Mango Street 90). Esperanza realizes that even though her mother is very talented and intelligent, her quitting school and becoming a wife and a mother of four children led her to deep isolation. She may have some power within the family, but when she is in the public, outside the house, she is helpless.

Esperanza expresses the bond to her grandmother, whose name she inherited. As “a wild horse of a woman” (Cisneros 12), Esperanza’s grandmother was unwilling to be married, but she was eventually forced to marriage by Esperanza’s grandfather, who “threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she was a fancy chandelier” (Cisneros 12), which was something she never forgave him. Esperanza’s grandmother, a strong, wild and powerful woman, spent the rest of her life as a broken shadow: “She looked out of the window her whole life, the way so many
women sit their sadness on an elbow” (Cisneros 12). Even though she was strong and independent as a young woman, Esperanza’s grandfather “tamed her” and turned her into the same passive unhappy creature as the aforementioned weak role models living on Mango Street. This story assures Esperanza that she does not want to succumb to the patriarchal norms of her community and that she must not share the fate of her tamed grandmother.

Perhaps the saddest case of an initially powerful woman who turns weak is Esperanza’s friend Sally. Beautiful and proud, Sally seems strong and (mostly sexually) independent. Because of her abusive father who frequently beats her, she tries to actively affect her future and she marries “young and not ready” (Cisneros 101). However, Sally does not escape the destiny of the other women on Mango Street:

She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry. ... Except he won’t let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t let her look out of the window. And he doesn’t like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. (Cisneros 101-102)

Sally, who tried to escape from the bleak future of an oppressed woman, was probably the most potent positive role-model for Esperanza. However, she also ends up as a passive, powerless victim.

Alicia, another Esperanza’s friend, is one of the few women of Mango Street who try to change their way of life; she starts studying a university. However, because her mother died, she has to take care of her father as well. Because of exhaustion, she starts to hallucinate – she sees mice. Her father mocks her hallucinations and her effort to study, which results in Alicia’s estrangement from him: “Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers” (Cisneros 32). Alicia also
reminds Esperanza that Mango Street is a part of her: “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back, too” (Cisneros 107). Even though Alicia has the potential of becoming an independent woman, she is aware of the duties she has towards her father and the society. Yet, unlike the other women in the community, she does not passively acquire these duties – she decides to stay in Mango Street because of her own will, which makes her one of the strongest female characters in the novel.

Almost every girl or woman that Esperanza approaches as a positive role model sooner or later proves herself to be passive, powerless or victimized by the patriarchal society and unable to help Esperanza in the search for her identity by showing her a positive example of a strong person. Alicia, the only person that challenges the image of a woman as an uneducated care-taker, eventually decides to embrace her traditional role within the community. The situation of Esperanza is therefore very similar to Holden’s, because he is also eventually disappointed with all his possible role models that are unable to help him.

3.5 Perception of Love and Sex

For Holden, love is connected to innocence and innocence is connected to childhood. He loves his brother Allie, who died too young to lose his innocence; he loves his sister Phoebe, who is still a child as well. Holden views innocence as such an important quality that he wants to become a catcher in the rye who prevents children from their fall into adulthood. The importance of innocence is also projected into Holden’s love life. “The most memorable love affair Holden has experienced had its fruition in daily checker games with Jane Gallagher ... She had become the symbol to him of romantic love, that is, innocent love” (Baumbach 465). That is why he reacts so furiously to Stradlater coming back from his date with Jane – Holden is afraid that
Stradlater corrupted Jane’s innocence and Holden wants to protect the innocence (both his own and that of others) throughout his life. He therefore cannot have sex with Sunny, a young prostitute that comes to his hotel room. “In not sleeping with her, he means to protect her innocence, not his own; he is spiritually, hence physically, unable to be a party to her further degradation” (Baumbach 467).

In his innocence, Holden views sex as a perversion or a violation of some kind. He is disgusted by “perverts” he sees from his hotel room bathroom – an elderly transvestite and a couple spitting on each other’s faces. “I’m not kidding, the hotel was lousy with perverts” says Holden, even though he admits that “that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch” (Salinger 62). Even though he is a bit of a voyeur, Holden primarily sees sex as a threat to innocence. That is why he is so furious when he sees the words “Fuck you” written in various places in New York, including Phoebe’s school or at The Natural History Museum. However, Holden “is more repelled by the ‘obscenity’ of the sexual act itself than by the obscene word” (Bryan 1069). One of the possible explanation of his fear and disgust of sex is that “thoughts of sex seem to lead Holden to thoughts of death” (Rosen 555).

Death and sex seem to be connected in Holden’s mind. After he fights with the “sexy” Stradlater over his date with Jane, Holden utters: “I almost wished I was dead” (Salinger 48). After Sunny leaves his hotel room, he talks to his dead brother. In one of the bars, he sees a man that talks with his girlfriend about his acquaintance that nearly committed suicide and at the same time he is “giving her the feel under the table” (Salinger 86). When Holden sees another “Fuck you” written on the museum wall, he contemplates about his tombstone (Salinger 204). Holden can have these associations because sex is the ultimate loss of innocence and coming into maturity – sex is a milestone on one’s way towards the inevitable death. As Rosen sums up, “here we
come full circle: Holden fears aggression because it may lead to death, sex is equated with aggression, and, once again, sex is thus connected with death and its agent, the grim-reaper Time” (Rosen 556).

In The House on Mango Street, Esperanza experiences only one-sided, platonic feelings of love for Sire – a boy who keeps looking at her, but is in a relationship with another girl. Yet Esperanza enjoys his looks: “It made your blood freeze to have somebody look at you like that” (Cisneros 73). She envies his girlfriend: “I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, ... imagining what I can’t see” (Cisneros 73). The situation of Esperanza and Sire is similar to that of Holden and Jane – both Holden and Esperanza lose the objects of their innocent platonic love because of someone more sexually experienced – in Holden’s case, it is “sexy bastard” Stradlater, in the case of Esperanza it is Lois, one of “those girls that go into alleys” (Cisneros 73).

Because Esperanza is much younger than Holden, she only becomes aware of her sexuality in the course of the novel. This awareness comes first with the physical changes, such as in the vignette called “The Family of Little Feet”, when Esperanza and her friends try on high-heel dancing shoes. The girls undergo a metamorphosis from little children to women, just because they and the people in their surroundings discover that they “have legs....all our own, good to look at, and long” (Cisneros 40). At first, the girls enjoy pretending that they are grown women and they do not take into account the warning of a grocer standing on the corner, who sees the disadvantages that womanhood brings: “Them are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them off before I call the cops, but we just run” (Cisneros 41). After a young boy calls them “ladies”, they decide that “they are the best shoes” and that they “will never go back to wearing the other kind again” (Cisneros 41). However,
then they meet an old drunk man who wants to pay for a kiss from one of the girls. After running away from him, they take their high-heeled shoes off: “We are tired of being beautiful” (Cisneros 42). Julián Olivares shows the strong resemblance between this first encounter with a man’s sexual aggression and the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood, with naïve, innocent little girls and men and boys as sexual predators - “wolves” (219). José Saldivar states that Cisneros “deflates a light-hearted reading of a typical child's dressing-up episode in order to focus on the girls' introduction to a sexual power structure that they only dimly perceive” (185). Surprised and frightened by the power of sex they did not know they had, the girls hide the shoes and do not try them on again. The high heels are a symbol of a grown woman, of “sexuality, marriage and fertility” (Olivares 233), as well as of the oppression women have to endure from men, and Esperanza and her friends are not yet prepared for this role.

The theme of sex as loss of innocence appears in The House of Mango Street as well. In “The Monkey Garden”, Esperanza does not approve of Sally flirting with boys, and when they want to exchange Sally’s kiss for her stolen keys, Esperanza is horrified: “I don’t know why, but something inside me wanted to throw a stick. Something wanted to say no when I watched Sally going into the garden with Tito’s buddies all grinning. It was just a kiss, that’s all” (Cisneros 96-97). Esperanza views the “involuntary” kisses as further loss of Sally’s innocence and tries to prevent it by complaining to the mother of one of the boys, but the boy’s mother does not understand Esperanza’s concern and ridicules her.

Esperanza’s later sexual experiences only deepen her perception of sex as an involuntary and violent loss of innocence. A man at work starts kissing her and “doesn’t let go” (Cisneros 55). That kiss is not a kiss of love – it makes Esperanza feel as a victim. This “theme of the silent, voiceless victim, the woman that is afraid to
denounce her attackers” (Herrera-Sobek 252) appears once more in the vignette “Red Clowns”, in which Esperanza is raped by two strangers while waiting for her friend Sally. The experience of being sexually violated is so unbearable for Esperanza that she tries to suppress the memory: "Sally, make him stop. I couldn't make them go away. I couldn't do anything but cry. I don't remember. It was dark. I don't remember. I don't remember. Please don't make me tell it all" (Cisneros 93). For Esperanza, sex is the opposite of love – it is an aggressive affirmation of male dominance.

Both Holden and Esperanza engage themselves in platonic and purely innocent relationships with the opposite sex. Innocence is a crucial value for both of them and sex represents aggression, violation and in Holden’s case even death, for it is a fatal loss of innocence, the last step into the world of “phony” adults.

3.6 Motives of Quest and Escape

As has been pointed out in Chapter 1, the motive of the quest is usually a central part of every coming-of-age novel. After being expelled from school, Holden begins his journey through the streets of New York and meets people who (albeit negatively) form his identity and his opinion on the world around him. “Holden’s world is post-war New York City ..., where, in successive incidents, he encounters pompous hypocrisy, ignorance, indifference, moral corruption, sexual perversion, and – pervading all – ‘phoniness’” (Kaplan 78). What is the reason of Holden’s quest? Heiserman and Miller argue that Holden “is driven toward love of his fellowman, charity ... he is seeking nothing less than stability and love” (130). However, he is not able to find these virtues anywhere in New York, except in his little sister, Phoebe. When Holden comes to understand that neither in his school, nor in New York is he going to find the peace, love and purity he longs for, he starts fantasizing about running away, to a “Huck Finn-like asylum, a cabin in the woods” (Seelye 27), “somewhere out West” (Salinger 198). On the one hand, Holden wants solitude: “I’d pretend I was one of those
deaf-mutes. ... I’d be through with having conversations for the rest of my life” (Salinger 198). But even when fantasizing about living in the middle of the woods, far from the corrupt society, these fantasies “involve being with someone” (Cowan 51). He asks his date Sally to run away with him. When pondering the possibility of “becoming” deaf-mute, he says “I’d meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute and we’d get married” (Salinger 199). For Holden, solitude does not mean happiness. He finally understands when watching Phoebe on the carousel and he decides not to go to the imaginary cabin, but to stay with Phoebe in the evil, corrupt, phony New York. “This is his paradox: he must leave innocence in order to protect innocence” (Baumbach 462). He becomes a “catcher” of his sister and her innocence and abandons the dream of fleeing the loveless civilization.

It seems that Esperanza is in a strikingly different position regarding the quest. After all, she does not set out for a physical journey – her whole narration takes place on Mango Street. However, as Thomas Matchie argues, the importance of physically being on a journey is not so relevant for coming-of-age novels.

What the boys go out to see simply comes past Esperanza, so that the effect is the same. She is simply a girl, and does not have the cultural opportunity to leave as they do. What is more important is that Mango Street continues a paradigm of growth where a young person encounters an outside world, evaluates it in relationship to herself, and then forges an identity. (68-69)

Esperanza does not leave her house and neighbourhood, but is still able to go on a spiritual quest during which she is formed by the people in her immediate surroundings (even though most of her role models are negative). Her symbolic journey as a woman and as an artist is important for her coming of age as well, as well as her looking for answers to her questions and solutions to her problems. And similarly to
Holden, while she seeks truth and love, Esperanza is not content with the world around her:

This quest for answers takes on an explicit tension because of the depth of the themes the narrator treats, but the manner in which she develops her search for answers is the fundamental dialectic of self-world. She describes what is around her, she responds to people and places, but, most importantly, she reflects on a world she did not make, and cannot change, but must control or she will be destroyed. (De Valdes 58).

Esperanza also dreams of a house that will be a refuge from the patriarchal society and from the crowded and crumbled house on Mango Street. For Esperanza, “the notion of house – a space of her own – is critical to her coming of age as a mature person and artist” (Klein 23). She pictures the house as “not a man’s house ... a house all my own ... a space for myself to go” (Cisneros 108). But Esperanza does not want a complete solitude – she wants to accommodate homeless people in the attic, because, as she says, “I will not forget who I am or where I came from” (Cisneros 87). Esperanza does not want to selfishly escape Mango Street – she wants to help other people, less fortunate than her, to be happier than they are. This resolution of Esperanza is reminded when she is told by three old women: “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” (Cisneros 105). Esperanza remembers this advice and at the end of the novel, she goes back (figuratively, through writing) “for the ones who cannot out” – the vulnerable, the sad, the violated of Mango Street.

Even though Holden actively travels in the course of the novel while Esperanza stays within the borders of her community, both characters are actively
engaged in a quest. They both look for what is good in the world, and in most places they just find the opposite of good – violence, perversion, death. Both Holden and Esperanza fantasize of being alone and having “a place of their own”, which would be free of the terrors of the world, but they both eventually find out that such escape to an imaginary better place is impossible and harmful for them and for the others. They decide to stay and to protect the innocent – in Holden’s case, his sister, in Esperanza’s case, the oppressed and silenced people of her community.
4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to provide a comparative analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and to support the argument that despite their considerably different life conditions, the experience of coming of age is similar for Holden Caulfield and Esperanza Cordero.

The chapter on the Bildungsroman and its features proves that even though neither of the analysed novels may be seen as traditional Bildungsromans, they serve as classical examples of modern American tradition of this genre that challenges some themes of the traditional concept but at the same time enriches the genre with new views and voices.

As the evidence above suggests, Holden and Esperanza’s experience of coming of age is quite similar despite their strikingly different features such as gender, socio-economic status or the role of family in their lives. In fact, the protagonists cope with similar problems even in the areas of life where their positions are opposite, such as their gender roles or their socio-economic status. The only part of their lives that is perceived differently by Holden and Esperanza is their relationship with their families – while Holden’s parents are virtually absent from the narrative and he seeks advice and sympathy in his brothers and sister, Esperanza’s family situation is quite the opposite: she has a loving relationship with her parents while she often views her siblings (all of them younger than herself) as a burden. The people Holden encounters – with the exception of his little sister and his dead brother – are unable to stand as positive role models for him. Esperanza is in the same situation; while it seems that some of the women of Mango Street are powerful and emancipated, they all end up as powerless and victimized, either because of their passivity or because of their choice; none of them poses as a positive role model for Esperanza. Even though Esperanza does not
physically set out on a journey as Holden does, she experiences the same quest to find love and innocence and to develop herself as a human being. Both Holden and Esperanza see innocence as a supreme quality and as a condition of love. Sex, on the other hand, is viewed as aggression, violation and even as a link to death by the characters. Last but not least, both Holden and Esperanza want to escape into solitude, but in the course of their narration they find out that they have to stay in their corrupt surroundings to protect the few remaining innocent people. To sum up, even though the differences may seem striking, the characters’ view on the people around them and their attempts to find a place for themselves within the society are very similar to each other.
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Summary

This Bachelor thesis provides a comparative analysis two coming-of-age novels, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. The work examines the experience of coming of age of the main characters of the novels and their attitudes towards the society in which they live.

The first part of the thesis is concerned with the Bildungsroman genre and its features within the two analysed texts. The section deals with the challenges of defining the Bildungsroman, as well as the development of the genre since its origin in the 19th century. It then turns the focus towards *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The House on Mango Street* and tries to answer the question whether these two books can be considered as Bildungsromans.

The second part of the thesis compares the main characters’ view on the gender roles the society assumes them to embrace, their socio-economic status, the relationships with their parents and siblings as well as their friends and role models. The characters’ perception of love and sex, their fantasies of escape and the motive of quest are also discussed within this section.

The thesis shows that even though the main characters of the two analysed novels grow up in very different environment, they have similar experience of becoming adults, no matter their age, gender or socio-economic status.
Resumé


První část práce se zabývá žánrem Bildungsroman a jeho znaky v obou analyzovaných textech. Tato sekce zkoumá výzvy spojené s definováním tohoto žánru a jeho vývoj od devatenáctého století. Poté se zaměřuje na *The Catcher in the Rye* a *The House on Mango Street* a pokouší se odpovědět na otázku, zda mohou tyto dvě knihy být považovány za vývojové romány.

Druhá část práce porovnává pohledy hrdinů na genderové role, kterým by se měli podle společenských konvencí podřídit, jejich socio-ekonomický status, vztahy s jejich rodiči a sourozenci, stejně jako s jejich přáteli a potenciálními vzory. V této části je také diskutováno vnímání lásky a sexu ze strany hlavních postav, jejich sny o úniku a motiv cesty či výpravy, který se v obou románech objevuje.

Tato práce dokazuje, že ačkoliv hlavní hrdinové analyzovaných románů vyrůstají ve velmi rozdílném prostředí, své dospívání prožívají velmi podobně, bez ohledu na věk, pohlaví nebo socio-ekonomický status.