The House on Mango Street Study Guide

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The House on Mango Street, which appeared in 1983, is a linked collection of forty-four short tales that evoke the circumstances and conditions of a Hispanic American ghetto in Chicago. The narrative is seen through the eyes of Esperanza Cordero, an adolescent girl coming of age. These concise and poetic tales also offer snapshots of the roles of women in this society They uncover the dual forces that pull Esperanza to stay rooted in her cultural traditions on the one hand, and those that compel her to pursue a better way of life outside the *barrio* on the other. Throughout the book Sandra Cisneros explores themes of cultural tradition, gender roles, and coming of age in a binary society that struggles to hang onto its collective past while integrating itself into the American cultural landscape. Cisneros wrote the vignettes while struggling with her identity as an author at the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop in the 1970s. She was influenced by Russian-born novelist and poet Vladimir Nabokov's memoirs and by her own experiences as a child in the Chicago *barrio.* This engaging book has brought the author critical acclaim and a 1985 Before Columbus American Book Award. Specifically, it has been highly lauded for its impressionistic, poetic style and powerful imagery. Though Cisneros is a young writer and her work is not plentiful, *The House on Mango Street* establishes her as a major figure in American literature. Her work has already been the subject of numerous scholarly studies and is often at the forefront of works that explore the role of Latinas in American society.

Author Biography

The experiences of Esperanza, the adolescent protagonist of *The House on Mango Street,* closely resemble those of Sandra Cisneros's childhood. The author was born *to* a Mexican father and a Mexican American mother in 1954 in Chicago, Illinois, the only daughter of seven children. The family, for whom money was always in short supply, frequently moved between the ghetto neighborhoods of Chicago and the areas of Mexico where her father's family lived. Cisneros remembers that as a child she often felt a sense of displacement. By 1966 her parents had saved enough money for a down payment on a run-down, two-story house in a decrepit Puerto Rican neighborhood on Chicago's north side. There Cisneros spent much of her childhood. This house, as well as the colorful group of characters Cisneros observed around her in the *barrio,* served as inspiration for some of the stories in The *House on Mango Street.*

The author once remarked. "Because we moved so much, and always in neighborhoods that appeared like France after World War II-empty lots and burned-out buildings-I retreated inside myself." Cisneros was an introspective child with few friends; her mother encouraged her to read and write at a young age, and made sure her daughter had her own library card. The author wrote poems and stories as a schoolgirl, but the impetus for her career as a creative writer came during her college years, when she was introduced to the works of Donald Justice, James Wright, and other writers who made Cisneros more aware of her cultural roots.

Cisneros graduated from Loyola University in 1976 with a B.A. in English. She began to pursue graduate studies in writing at the University of Iowa, and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing in 1978. Cisneros says that through high school and college, she did not perceive herself as being different from her fellow English majors. She spoke Spanish only at home with her father, but otherwise wrote and studied within the mainstream of American literature. At the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Cisneros found her true voice as an author. Compared with her more privileged, wealthier classmates from more stable environments, Cisneros's cultural difference as a Chicana became clear. Though at first she imitated the style and tone of acclaimed American authors, Cisneros came to realize that her experience as a Hispanic woman differed from that of her classmates and offered an opportunity to develop her own voice. Cisneros once remarked, "Everyone seemed to have some communal knowledge which I did not have-My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been bred as fine hothouse flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks." The author began to explore her past experiences, which served as the inspiration of many of her stories and distinguished her from her peers. Her master's thesis, My *Wicked Wicked Ways* (Iowa, 1978, published as a book in 1987) is a collection of poems that begins to explore daily experiences, encounters, and observations in this new-found voice.

Cisneros has held several fellowships that have allowed her to focus *on* her writing full-time. These awards have enabled her to travel to Europe and *to* other parts of the United States, including a stint in Austin, Texas, where she experienced another thriving

community of Latin American culture. She has also taught creative writing and worked with students at the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago.

Plot Summary

The House on Mango Street is the coming of age story of Esperanza Cordero, a preadolescent Mexican American girl (Chicana) living in the contemporary United States. A marked departure from the traditional novel form, *The House on Mango Street* is a slim book consisting of forty-four vignettes, or literary sketches, narrated by Esperanza and ranging in length from two paragraphs to four pages. In deceptively simple language, the novel recounts the complex experience of being young, poor, female, and Chicana in America The novel opens with a description of the Cordero family's house on Mango Street, the most recent in a long line of houses they have occupied. Esperanza is dissatisfied with the house, which is small and cramped, and doesn't want to stay there. But Mango Street is her home now, and she sets out to try to understand it.

Mango Street is populated by people with many different life stories, stories of hope and despair. First there is Esperanza's own family, her kind father who works two jobs and is absent most of the tune; her mother, who can speak two languages and sing opera but never finished high school; her two brothers Carlos and Kiki; and her little sister Nenny. Of the neighborhood children Esperanza meets, there is Cathy, who shows her around Mango Street but moves out shortly thereafter because the neighborhood is "getting bad." Then there are Rachel and Lucy, sisters from Texas, who become Esperanza and Nenny's best friends. There is Meme, who has a dog with two names, one in Spanish and one in English, and Louie the boy from Puerto Rico whose cousin steals a Cadillac one day and gives all the children a ride.

Then there are the teenage girls of Mango Street, whom Esperanza studies carefully for clues about becoming a woman. There is Marin from Puerto Rico, who sells Avon cosmetics and takes care of her younger cousins, but is waiting for a boyfriend to change her life. There is Alicia, who must take care of her father and siblings because her mother is dead, but is determined to keep going to college. And there is Esperanza's beautiful friend Sally, who marries in the eighth grade in order to get away from her father but is now forbidden by her husband to see her friends. Esperanza, Nenny, Lucy, and Rachel discover that acting sexy is more dangerous than liberating when a neighbor gives them four pairs of hand-me-down high heels. They strut around the neighborhood acting like the older girls until a homeless man accosts them. After fleeing, the girls quickly take off the shoes with the intention of never wearing them again.

The grown women Esperanza comes across on Mango Street are less daring and hopeful than the teenage girls, but they have acquired the wisdom that comes with experience. They advise Esperanza not to give up her independence in order to become a girlfriend or wife Her Aunt Lupe, who was once pretty and strong but is now dying, encourages Esperanza to Write poetry. Her mother, who was once a good student, a "smart cookie," regrets having dropped out of school. There are other women in the neighborhood who don't fit into either category, like Edna's Ruthie, a grownup

who "likes to play." While the text implies that Ruthie is developmentally disabled, Esperanza perceives her as somebody who "sees lovely things everywhere."

Through observing and interacting with her neighbors, Esperanza forms a connection to Mango Street which conflicts with her desire to leave. At the funeral for Rachel and Lucy's baby sister she meets their three old aunts who read her palm and her mind:

Esperanza The one with marble hands called me aside Esperanza. She held my face with her blue veined hands and looked and looked at me. A long silence. When you leave you must remember always to come back, she said.
What?
When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are.
Then I didn't know what to say it was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish.
You must remember to come back For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you Yon will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused

The three sisters tell Esperanza that while she will go far in life she must remember to come back to Mango Street for the others who do not get as far. By the novel's end Esperanza has realized that her writing is one way to maintain the connection to Mango Street without having to give up her own independence. She will tell the stories of the "ones who cannot out."

The House on Mango Street

The House on Mango Street Summary

The book begins with the title piece, "The House on Mango Street." The young narrator, Esperanza, recalls how her family did not always live on Mango Street and only moved to it in the 70s after living in a terrible place on the third floor of a rundown building on Loomis Street. There was a Laundromat on the first floor of that building, which had been robbed, and as a result, boarded up, making the building look barren and dangerous. There were bars on the windows of her third floor home, so that she and her brothers and sister would not fall out onto the street.

When Esperanza moves to Mango Street, her family has grown to six people, including Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, her sister Nenny, and herself. As the oldest, she is responsible for various chores and responsibilities in the family and in the house. She recalls moving often, and more so, recalls her mother dreaming about owning a house with a full staircase inside, like on TV, and no landlord or problems. The new house on Mango Street is nothing like the house her mother described, but still it is her new home, despite the cracked paint and crumbling bricks, and she hopes it will be better than the house on Loomis Street.

The House on Mango Street Analysis

The House on Mango Street opens with the title chapter, as young Esperanza describes her home. According to Cisneros, she wanted to describe a neighborhood similar to her own; one in which people do not always live in large houses with numerous rooms. Esperanza's voice is quite young and innocent in this opening chapter. She sets the mood, the scene, and the central characters in the book by simply listing them. Lists are comprehensive expository beginnings that classically set the scene for the remainder of the story. The reader understands the family dynamic based on the simplistic voice of the child. Further, Cisneros allows the prose to flow in this child voice, occasionally interspersing rather mature and sophisticated metaphors, insinuating Esperanza's intelligence that is bound to come out in the chapters to come.

Hairs

Hairs Summary

Esperanza details the hair of her family members as she looks upon each of them with fondness. Each one's hair has a different type and style to it. "My Papa's hair is like a broom, all up in the air. And me, my hair is lazy. It never obeys barrettes or bands. Carlos' hair is thick and straight. He doesn't need to comb it. Nenny's hair is slippery – slides out of your hand. And Kiki, who is the youngest, has hair like fur" (Cisneros 7). Yet, out of all her family members' hair, she treasures her mother's hair. She sees it like candy circles and softness, and mostly, she thinks it smells like fresh bread.

Hairs Analysis

Esperanza's analysis of her family's hair not only deciphers her family members, pulling them apart into mere body parts, but it also brings the reader closer to her family. By intricately describing the hair of her father, her mother, and her siblings, she is unconsciously inviting the readers into her home on Mango Street. Furthermore, Esperanza looks at hair as simple labels for the people in her family. If her hair is lazy, then perhaps she believes she is looked upon as lazy. This notion continues with her father and his broom hair. If all his hair is up in the air, then perhaps his mind is, as well. Esperanza will return to her father's lofty ideas several times during the selections, and this first image of a man with all of his hair up in the air, is one that not only provokes laughter, but also can parallel his personality and actions. Esperanza ends the chapter with her mother's hair, as it is soft, lovely, and smells like fresh bread. This treasured hair is analogous with a young girl's image of her mother at the onset of puberty. Her mother is her caretaker, the person who raises her, dresses her, and feeds her in the morning with bread. As Esperanza grows into a young woman, the image of her mother will alter. However, this first, fresh, and innocent picture of a young girl admiring her mother's soft hair is one that parallels true human emotions.

Boys & Girls

Boys & Girls Summary

Esperanza looks at the girls and boys in her family, specifically trying to understand how they relate to each another. She knows that Carlos and Kiki are each other's best friends, playing their male friends outside. They only play with the girls inside the house. Outside the house, they have nothing to do with Nenny and Esperanza. However, Esperanza is a bit sad and lonely because she believes Nenny is too young to be her friend. She is lucky and thrilled that Nenny is her sister, because she knows that people cannot pick their own sisters, and she in fact has a great sister. Since Nenny is just slightly younger than she is, Esperanza knows that she must take care of her little sister. She hopes that one day she will have her own best friend who will understand her and laugh at her jokes. In the meantime, however, she thinks of herself as a red balloon tied to an anchor.

Boys & Girls Analysis

In this third chapter, still introducing the family relations and still setting the boundaries of the family relationships, Esperanza divulges her deep desires with regard to siblings. Carlos and Kiki, her younger brothers, are constantly referred to as distant creatures. She knows that boys are each other's best friends, as are girls and more importantly sisters. This distance established so early on in the book follows Esperanza until its conclusion. Carlos and Kiki rarely spend time with their sisters, and as a result, remain foggy images in the reader's mind, much as if they must be with Esperanza.

Esperanza is indeed thrilled to have a sister, as she understands that in the world sisters should be each other's best friends. At this point in her adolescence, though, she feels alone. Her brothers have each other, and her little sister, Nenny, she believes, is too young to play with the way she desires. As a result, she feels trapped. She feels as if she must protect her little sister, yet at the same time wants to fly away.

It is interesting to note that Esperanza calls herself a "red" balloon. The color red is frequented in these chapters. The house in which she lives on Mango Street is red and she feels trapped inside it at times. Now, the balloon she calls herself is also red. Red, the color of passion, blood, and love will revisit Esperanza repeatedly.

My Name

My Name Summary

Esperanza thinks of the origin of her name and wishes she had a different one. She is named after her great-grandmother, who was also born during the Chinese year of the Horse. She becomes sad when she thinks of her great-grandmother, who was swept away by a man and lonely for the rest of her life. "She looked out the window he whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow…I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 12). Esperanza resents the long, arduous pronunciation of her, she and is constantly teased at school because of it. She thinks Nenny is lucky, because at school she must go by her full given name, Magdalena, which is just as difficult to say at is Esperanza, but at least when she comes home she can be Nenny. Esperanza dreams of changing her name to Zeze the X.

My Name Analysis

The name Esperanza, which technically translates into "hope" in Spanish, plagues the central character throughout the course of the novel. She longs for a short and simple name, or one that can be shortened into a nickname. This desperation for simplicity and natural assimilation into American culture reflects second-generation immigrants. She looks to the multi-syllabic, confusing word with frustration. Furthermore, she looks to her namesake with sadness. She never wants to be a sad, lonely woman like her great-grandmother. This quest for a better, stronger future places Esperanza in clash with her past, and consequently her name. While she cannot separate her name from the past at this point in her life, it is evident through her growth over the course of the book, that she will grow to be a fulfilled young woman, strong and independent, and one who loves her name for its beauty and value.

Cathy Queen of Cats

Cathy Queen of Cats Summary

Cathy is Esperanza's neighbor who claims to be a distant relation to the queen of France. Surrounded by cats, she pretends to befriend Esperanza. However, Cathy tells Esperanza that she is moving north of Mango Street, mostly because the neighborhood is getting bad. She does not realize what she says and whom she says it to, as Esperanza's family has just moved into the neighborhood.

Cathy Queen of Cats Analysis

The neighbor Cathy represents the class divide in America. She embodies the migration to suburbia and the clash of culture between varying ethnicities in the United States. Because both children are quite young, they do not necessarily realize the cause for such animosity or frustration. However, when Cathy tells Esperanza she is leaving Mango Street because it is becoming a bad neighborhood, Cathy does not necessarily understand what she is saying or to whom she is saying it. Cathy is merely talking to her friend Esperanza. However, Cathy (and the representative white suburban population) may grow up to live separate from the rest of her fellow human beings for the rest of her life. At this sensitive juncture in history, we see the origins of possible prejudice by people who do not even understand it. Cathy simply repeats words her father tells her. Esperanza simply remains quiet.

Our Good Day

Our Good Day Summary

Esperanza meets two young girls named Lucy and Rachel who have moved to Mango Street from Texas. They ask for five dollars in exchange for lifelong friendship. Esperanza runs home to gather the money. She has three dollars and takes two of Nenny's dollars, quickly handing over the cash to her new friends. Cathy, who is moving away on Tuesday, shuns these girls and leaves the street for her home. With the five dollars, the girls purchase a bicycle and spend the rest of the day playing and sharing and riding the bike around the neighborhood.

Our Good Day Analysis

Lucy and Rachel represent the friendship that Esperanza longs for in her new home. While she thinks that Nenny cannot truly be her friend, she finds another set of sisters nearing the same age and age gap. This pairing brings Esperanza out of her shell and into the laughter that she so desperately needs during her youth.

The meeting of these four girls sets a standard of power between them. Lucy and Rachel immediately bombard Esperanza wanting money in exchange for friendship. Esperanza may take this arrangement into the future, believing that once a person agrees to be your friend, she is forever your friend. She will learn in later chapters that the bonds of friendship are sometimes powerful and sometimes less meaningful as those of family members. Nonetheless, as the girls from Texas introduce themselves to Esperanza and Nenny, they introduce the possibility of enjoyment and fun on Mango Street that Esperanza previously believed to be nearly impossible.

Laughter

Laughter Summary

When she looks at Rachel and Lucy, Esperanza immediately notices that the two girls are sisters, especially because of their identical thick Popsicle lips. However, when she thinks deeper, she sees even more similarities between herself and Nenny. For example, they have the exact same laugh. When the four girls are playing outside on Mango Street, Esperanza spots a house that she thinks looks like Mexico. Nenny bursts into the same laugh, agreeing that the house, indeed, does look like Mexico.

Laughter Analysis

Lucy and Rachel become closer to Esperanza, not only because of the friendship they provide, but also because of the friendship they strengthen between Esperanza and her own sister. Through similarities between Lucy and Rachel, Esperanza begins to notice all the similarities she shares with her young sister. She hears Nenny laugh and knows that it is identical to her own laugh. Sometimes, the familial traits are not always visible to the naked eye. Esperanza begins to realize that she might share more than a house on Mango Street with Nenny. She shares a house, a history in Mexico, a family, and a future. While they can play with Lucy and Rachel, they will never be sisters with Lucy and Rachel, and as a result, will always be slightly distant to those without the same history, heritage, and of course, laugh.

Gil's Furniture Bought & Sold

Gil's Furniture Bought & Sold Summary

Nenny and Esperanza visit Gil's Used Furniture Store, where they peruse old secondhand items, furniture and just little throwaway items. Gil, the owner, is an elderly black man, who walks through the store, silently monitoring everything that goes on within his jurisdiction. He sometimes scares Esperanza; however, Nenny is unafraid to ask him questions. She inquires about an old music box. Yet, after their discussion, just as Nenny reaches inside her pockets for some change, Gil tells her that it is not for sale.

Gil's Furniture Bought & Sold Analysis

Gil's furniture shop can be likened to a candy store in the old fashioned all American movie. It is dark and full of exciting and unknown things. All of the girls want to play with some items; all of them are intrigued by the inventory and owner. However, the youngest girl, Nenny, is the only person who has the guts to speak. Nenny's insistence reflects the honesty and shamelessness of young people. Esperanza, turning the corner on adolescence is slowly becoming self-conscious and aware of her surroundings. More importantly, she is becoming aware of the people around her and their opinions. While still young, Nenny sees no problem in speaking to the owner. Furthermore, she sees no problem when he tells her that it is not for sale. A few years older and more easily aware and embarrassed, Esperanza feels scared around this man.

Meme Ortiz

Meme Ortiz Summary

A family with a boy by the name of Juan Ortiz moves into Cathy's old house on the block. Because he introduces himself as Meme, he is known as Meme to everyone but his mother. Meme has a large floppy sheepdog with two names, one in English and one in Spanish, who plays with him in the streets. The dog follows Meme everywhere, especially through the awkward house in which he lives. Esperanza remembers that Cathy's father built the house with his own two hands, so there are all sorts of slants and lopsided steps in it. Yet, despite all the nooks in the house, Esperanza's favorite part of it is the large tree resting in front. They choose the tree as their first base for the First Annual Tarzan Jumping Contest, which Meme wins this time, breaking both of his arms.

Meme Ortiz Analysis

The incident with new neighbor Meme Ortiz symbolizes not only the transforming face of Mango Street, but also the youthful presence of its residents. Meme Ortiz, unlike Cathy, is not from America. He has a sheepdog with both a Spanish and English name. This dog represents the changing sound of America, as well. In due time, many people and places will speak in both languages. However, at this point, it is only acceptable for people to speak in English.

The Annual Tarzan Jumping Contest represents the youthful flair of Esperanza and her friends. While she is growing up and meeting new people, she still wants to play in the street and climb trees. The neighborhood is safe enough for the children to play outside all day long. However, when Meme falls down and breaks both of his arms, the injury is indicative of what may come to Mango Street in the future. Cathy's family has already left because her father claims the area is getting bad. It is only bad in their eyes. However, as Meme has moved into her old house, it seems as though those comments have established injuries in the people who will live on Mango Street. Meme jumps headlong into those problems, resulting in serious consequences during his early days of residence.

Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin

Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin Summary

Meme's house has a downstairs apartment that his family rents out to a family from Puerto Rico. Louie is the oldest in a family of all girls, and although Louie is really Esperanza's brother's friend, she still likes to spend time with him. Louie has a female cousin named Marin, who sells Avon makeup, paints her face with it, and stands waiting in the doorway all day long singing songs. Louie has another cousin who visits them one afternoon in a brand new yellow Cadillac. He arrives and tells everyone to hop in the car. Esperanza loves the soft seats and spacious back of the car, and she wonders where he got the car. Suddenly, they hear a siren and Louie's cousin tells everyone to get out of the car quickly. He speeds away down the street, with the police following him. The street ends and Louie's car crashes into a lamppost. Luckily, Louie is unharmed, save a swollen lip and bruised forehead. Yet still, he is handcuffed and placed in the backseat of the police car.

Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin Analysis

This chapter introduces many characters on Mango Street with cameos mainly in this chapter. While Marin reappears, Louie is cuffed and taken away forever. Marin is one of the first girls who Esperanza looks to with admiration and advice. As Esperanza is the eldest of four children, she has no older sister with whom to discuss makeup and boys. As a result, she stares at the older girls on the block, wondering what they do with their days and their bodies and their men.

Louie brings a stolen vehicle, crime, and the police into Mango Street. He drives into the street, metaphorically corrupting the young children playing in it. The young children look to this attractive man with an expensive car and follow him blindly. However, his image is quickly tarnished as he is taken away in a police car. Cathy's family thinks that they must escape this neighborhood. However, a young man who has stolen a car can drive into any neighborhood in any city. Nonetheless, Louie's more tactile gift of awakening forces Esperanza to grow up even faster. She is still quite young when she first witnesses a car crash and police chase in her front yard.

Marin

Marin Summary

Marin has a boyfriend waiting for her in Puerto Rico who she plans to marry when she returns, she claims. She writes him letters and dreams of being carried away into a nice big house with a boy who loves her. She claims that if she stays on Mango Street a bit longer, she will want to get a job downtown where she can dress pretty and meet men on the subway. Esperanza looks at Marin with hungry eyes and understands that she knows how to act around men. She is always painting her eyes, smoking a cigarette, or singing the same old song, thinking of her boyfriend back in Puerto Rico. Esperanza sees her as a fearless woman in the face of boys.

Marin Analysis

Again, Esperanza looks to Marin as the teacher, the sister, and the mother all combined into one package. Though she rarely speaks to Marin and primarily has a relationship from afar, she still thinks of Marin often when she ponders men, jobs, and life. Women like Marin remain in Esperanza's mind as she grows into a young woman. When she goes to look for a job, she will think of Marin's actions. It is this fascination with people outside her family that demonstrate Esperanza's entrance into young adulthood. She no longer sees her family as the sole influence in her life. It is now friends, cousins, and neighbors.

Those Who Don't

Those Who Don't Summary

Esperanza knows that when other people drive into her neighborhood, they get scared, thinking that someone will attack them with knives. She knows that they are stupid and scared for no reason, and that they simply get lost driving into the area. She knows that she is not afraid of the people the other see as fearful. These people are just the neighborhood cripples, dummies, and friends. "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yea. That is how it goes and goes" (Cisneros 34).

Those Who Don't Analysis

This chapter demonstrates Esperanza's gradual and forceful expansion of the mind. She is beginning to understand the world around her; she is starting to see that other people do not look at her as she sees herself. While she may not have been personally discriminated against, she sees injustices in her friends and neighbors. While Cisneros never forcefully instructs the reader to feel a specific emotion, it is through the eyes and mind of the young child, Esperanza, that we as readers understand the divide in American society. By placing this chapter a third of the way into the book, we have already grown to love these characters; we have gotten to know them through the mind of a child. Now, when we see drivers get lost on Mango Street, locking their doors and fearing for their lives, we know that they are simply misguided and unclear. If these issues were addressed from the mindset of an adult, they would appear preachy and didactic. However, by presenting them from the eyes of a blossoming young adult, we relate, understand, and care.

There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do

There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do Summary

Rosa Vargas, who lives down the street, was left alone with so many children. Her husband left her without money, without a note, without any information of his whereabouts. Esperanza knows that her life must be so difficult, as the Vargas' kids are always getting into trouble, disrespecting people, and causing a raucous. She also realizes that there comes a time when people just stop worrying, though. When enough people look out for the kids and they simply spit in their faces, there is nothing more to be done. Esperanza feels sorry for Rosa Vargas, who is stuck alone in that house with too many children to control.

There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do Analysis

Rosa Vargas represents one future path for young girls in her neighborhood. This sad and lonely woman can no longer protect her children from the streets; she can no longer control their minds and mold them, as mothers do. Esperanza looks down upon Rosa Vargas while simultaneously pitying her. Yet, despite these young emotions, the overall sentiment is of fear. Nobody wants to be left in Rosa Vargas's position, most of all Esperanza. This presentation of life only fuels Esperanza even more to want to leave Mango Street and the life she believes it will bring.

Alicia Who Sees Mice

Alicia Who Sees Mice Summary

Alicia, a local Mango Street neighbor, rises early to catch two trains and a bus into the city so that she can study at the university. Her mother died when she was young, and as a result, has only her father with whom to live. Her father thinks that a woman's place is in the home, the kitchen, and behind the sink. Despite her independent beliefs, she continues to need her father, as she believes she sees mice in the house. Her father thinks she is crazy for seeing mice, for seeing stars, and wanting to dream to a better life.

Alicia Who Sees Mice Analysis

Alicia represents the woman who strives to achieve, who strives to leave Mango Street, not in a rushed marriage or police car, but through a university. Yet, despite her attempts at individuality, she remains trapped by her father and his beliefs. As readers, we can see her desire to flee, and we see Esperanza's visions in Alicia's visions. Alicia is simply another person in Esperanza's life who represents one path for the future. By observing all of these options, Esperanza can make the most appropriate decision for herself when the time comes.

Darius & the Clouds

Darius & the Clouds Summary

Esperanza realizes that there is little beauty in her neighborhood. There are no flowers, butterflies, and even sky. However, one little boy in the area, Darius, who is known as being a fool and hating school, constantly looks up to the clouds. One day, however, he looks to the sky and says that the clouds are beautiful, and quite simply, that they look like God. Nobody disagrees.

Darius & the Clouds Analysis

Sometimes it takes outside eyes to force you to see reality. While Esperanza and her friends and family are internally convinced that nothing of value, nothing beautiful, exists on Mango Street, young foolish Darius differs in opinion. Like many classic literary tales, there is often the fool, the blind man, or the soothsayer who is shunned, yet truly elicits truth and beauty in life. In most Shakespearean plays, there is a fool or blind man. Here, young Darius, known as the village fool, speaks of looking into the clouds to see beauty, to see God. When he subconsciously forces his neighbors to look outside of their street, their homes, and to see the greatness of life, the grandiosity of humanity, nobody can argue, and suddenly all the roles are reversed. The fool is the teacher and the students are the residents.

And Some More

And Some More Summary

Rachel, Lucy, Nenny, and Esperanza look up into the sky and discuss the different names for clouds, from cumulous to nimbus. They discuss the different names, they claim, the Eskimos have for snow. From the names for snow to the names for clouds, Esperanza falls into a great argument with her two friends. They call each other names, until Lucy and Rachel tell Nenny that they are never coming over to the house again to play. The two sets of sisters argue, calling each other names.

And Some More Analysis

Often silly little arguments are the root of disagreement and long time severance of relationships. This chapter may foreshadow future disagreements between the set of friends. However, as the book continues, Lucy and Rachel do in fact remain friends with Esperanza and Nenny. Yet, this chapter illustrates a growing discord between the four girls as they grow to realize their own differences. While they are all girls, just as clouds are all clouds, there are different types of them. Esperanza is just started to discover what type of girl she wants to be.

The Family of Little Feet

The Family of Little Feet Summary

Esperanza recalls a family she knows with little hands, little legs, sleight height, and mostly tiny feet. Their shoes are little and everything about them is little. Esperanza and Nenny look down to their own feet, describing the normal size and the color and shape of their shoes. Rachel is wearing one high heel and strutting around like a queen. The girls laugh at her, all wanting to try on the lady's heel. A boy on a bicycle calls to her, whistling. They giggle at the attention they get from wearing this type of shoe and claim they will wear nothing else. Then, near the Laundromat, an older man comes up to Rachel wanting to kiss her. He says he will give her a dollar in exchange for a kiss. This man terrifies the girls, and they run away all the way up Mango Street until they arrive at home.

The Family of Little Feet Analysis

In another chapter highlighting the transformation into adolescence, Esperanza and her friends walk the fine line between playtime and inappropriate dress-up. They are fascinated by the look and feel of the high-heeled shoes that Rachel wears. They love the way it makes them feel: tall, thin, and mature. However, as soon as they receive all sort of attention because of this type of shoe, they run away, unsure that they are ready for such a life. The image of young girls playing dress-up in adult clothing stretches the safety of adolescence. Yet through this vision and chapter, the book proceeds in its development of a young girl to a young woman.

A Rice Sandwich

A Rice Sandwich Summary

Esperanza hears of a dining hall at school called the Canteen, where certain kids get to go to eat lunch. It is here that the children who cannot go home for lunch bring their food. Esperanza begs her mother to make her a sandwich and write her a note saying that she can eat lunch at school. Her mother is angry with her for providing more work to do. Nenny, Kiki, and Carlos do not want to eat lunch at school in the Canteen, as Nenny goes home with a friend who has a color TV, and the boys act as patrolmen near school. Esperanza claims that if she were home less, then her mother would be mad at her less and love her more.

Esperanza's mother eventually writes the note and makes a rice sandwich for her, as the family has no money for lunchmeat. "Dear Sister Superior, Please let Esperanza eat in the lunchroom because she lives too far away and she gets tired. As you can see, she is very skinny. I hope to God she does not faint" (Cisneros, 53-54). When lunchtime calls, one of the nuns brings Esperanza to the principal's office for a scolding. She tells her that she lives close by and should never eat at school when she is so close to home. She pulls Esperanza on top of a stack of books, pointing to a raggedy house three blocks away. Esperanza starts to cry when she concedes that the ugly house is her own, when she knows it is not. The nun allows her to eat lunch in the Canteen, but only for this one day. As she eats her soggy, cold sandwich, she hears all the kids looking at her as she cries.

A Rice Sandwich Analysis

In a detailed tale of desire, Esperanza craves a new life. Like she does in each chapter, she looks outside her own status and hopes for a new one. In the case of lunch at school, Esperanza wants to eat lunch with the other kids at school. She dreams constantly of this escape, discovering that it is not as ideal as she had imagined. Furthermore, in the enormous attempt to achieve such a grand status (of eating lunch at school), she suffers greatly. A rice sandwich, like a book cover, never reveals its truth. Things are never what they appear to be and when you hope for something so strong, it might not be as important as you thought it would be.

Chanclas

Chanclas Summary

Esperanza sees her mother all dressed nicely in a new dress, as they go to a distant cousin's wedding. Esperanza is embarrassed by her large feet, and constantly looks down to the ground to make sure they are not causing too much trouble. She hears her Uncle Nacho talking about her mother. He asks her to dance, but she says no. She hears everyone around her laughing and having fun. However, Esperanza is nervous to dance and relax, because she is wearing a new dress, new underclothes, new everything, except for her brown everyday shoes. Uncle Nacho pulls her to the dance floor, where she spins and spins, feeling the music enter her. When the song ends, she can feel everyone watching her dance, with her big brown ordinary shoes leading her.

Chanclas Analysis

Esperanza is still trying to fit into society and her own skin this chapter. She feels awkward about her body, as she looks to her feet as too large. She feels awkward in her surroundings, as she feels uncomfortable dancing. However, despite her own self-consciousness, others around her do not view her in the same awkward light. People are beginning to look upon Esperanza as a young woman. Her uncle wants to dance with her in a more sensual manner. Still, she feels the eyes of everyone pasted on her. When many girls enter adolescence, they begin to feel self-conscious of their every movement. Esperanza is walking directly into this chapter in her life.

It is interesting to note that this chapter opens with a lovely description of Esperanza's mother, a beautiful mature woman. The chapter concludes with Esperanza's uncomfortable stance on the dance floor. These two images are juxtaposed in the small chapter in order to establish further the different stages in life. Once Esperanza passes through adolescence and young adulthood, she has her mother's life in which she will step.

Hips

Hips Summary

Esperanza, Nenny, Lucy, and Rachel are discussing hips and laughing. They bring all of the definitions of hips to the table. They joke that women suddenly wake up one day with these bony hips on their bodies, not knowing what to do with them. Rachel thinks they are used to hold babies while cooking, and Lucy believes they are needed to dance. Nenny says that if you do not get hips, you turn into a man. Everyone laughs at her, but Esperanza feels for her sister, despite her youth and naiveté. Esperanza remembers what Alicia tells her about hips and claims that they are scientifically designed for having babies. "They bloom like roses, I continue because it's obvious I'm the only who can speak with any authority; I have science on my side. The bones just one day open. Just like that. One day you might decide to have kids, and then where are you going to put them? Got to have room. Bones got to give" (Cisneros 59). The girls begin to make rhymes and sing invented songs about hips, sometimes spreading into uncharted territory. When the girls create songs, partially about hips, partially about innocence, and partially about sex, they make Nenny come up with her own song. Yet, while Nenny is singing, everybody sees that she is in a different world, dancing in her own mind, and speaking words that feel inappropriate even to her friends.

Hips Analysis

The poetry in this chapter divides the girls into children and adults. The language is powerful when Rachel and Esperanza discuss the need for hips. They pick up on ideas they hear from their parents, that they read, and ultimately that they feel in their bones. The discussion grows from simple biology to sensuality. They girls play with their sexuality without knowing their actions. If a person were to look in on their circle of rhymes, that person would worry that these girls are acting too old for their age. However, they are simply learning about sexuality from themselves and from their outside influences. Nobody has simply discussed the facts with the girls at this point. They only learn about the need for hips, for sexuality, and for child rearing from their own imaginations. At this point, the girls are old enough to learn about men from an adult. Yet, they are playing around as children with adult themes, a further time, blurring the lines between innocence and experience.

The First Job

The First Job Summary

Esperanza is thrilled to get her first job, as she is desperate for money so that she can continue to go to private Catholic school. Her parents tell her that if she goes to public school, she will turn out bad. Her Aunt Lala works at Peter Pan Photo Finishers on North Broadway and informs her that if she goes in with a job application saying that she is one year older than she actually is, she can get a job. Sure enough, Esperanza begins working the day she applies, matching negatives with photos and placing them in envelopes. At lunchtime, she eats standing up in the washroom stalls, as she is afraid to eat with the adults in the lunchroom. When she is nearing the end of the day, she hides in the coatroom for her break, where she meets an elderly Oriental man. He wants to kiss her, coaxing her closer to him. He tells her it is his birthday and then pulls her face in and kisses her right on the lips, holding on tightly, and not letting go.

The First Job Analysis

In another chapter where the definitions are blurred between maturity and innocence, Esperanza lies in order to secure her first job. While it should be based on excitement and preparation for her future, this job is full of confusion and indecision. She is too young to work; yet, she goes to a job. She is too young to feel comfortable with the adults in the lunchroom, so she hides in the coatroom. The excitement of working, like the previous excitement of meeting boys, wearing high heels, dancing at weddings, and eating in the lunch room at school, are all met with disappointment. Likewise, this first experience of work is also met with sadness and disappointment.

While working, Esperanza does not understand what she is doing. This simple statement parallels her current path. She does not exactly understand what she is doing with her life, with regard to school, friends, family, and boys. It is also interesting to note that the name of the photo store is called Peter Pan, the story of a little boy who did not want to grow up. Peter Pan is a child caught in an adult's body, bending the boundaries of maturation.

Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark

Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark Summary

Esperanza's father visits her early in the morning to tell her that his father, her grandfather, has died. He will fly to Mexico, see his cousins, and take part in the funeral. "I know that he will have to go away, that will take a plane to Mexico, all the uncles and aunts will be there, and they will have a black-and-white photo taken in front of the tomb with flowers shaped like spears in a white vase because this is how they send the dead away in that country" (Cisneros 68-69). Esperanza's responsibility, as the oldest child, is to tell the rest of the kids what has happened and informs them of the reason they cannot play. Esperanza grows sad, thinking of her own father, and is terrified of what would happen if he were to die. She holds him tight, not wanting to let go for anything in the world.

Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark Analysis

In Esperanza's first real connection with death, she learns of her grandfather's passing. No blossoming into a young woman, she handles this news with grace and maturity. As the oldest child, she must step foot into the role of the advisor and leader. She does so seamlessly, accepting death for what it is and understanding the boundaries and realities of life. At this point, the readers see Esperanza as a young woman ready to take responsibility for herself and for her family.

Born Bad

Born Bad Summary

Everyone in Esperanza's family thinks she was born bad and will go to hell. The reason they all think poorly of Esperanza is because of her dear Aunt Lupe, a woman who used to be as beautiful and elegant as Joan Crawford, with a strong body like a swimmer. Esperanza used to stare at her beauty in old photographs. However, suddenly Aunt Lupe became gravely ill, blind, and paralyzed, living out her days under yellow bed sheets in the back room of the second floor rear apartment. Nobody knows what ails her, but just that she seems to be dying for years. "But I think diseases have no eyes. They pick with a dizzy finger anyone, just anyone. Like my aunt who happened to be walking down the street one day in her Joan Crawford dress, in her funny felt hat with the black feather, cousin Totchy in one hand, baby Frank in the other" (Cisneros 72). Esperanza has fond memories of reading poetry to Aunt Lupe, and Aunt Lupe advising her to keep writing.

Esperanza and her friends play games all the while, mimicking and impersonating famous people, such as Marilyn Monroe and Wonder Woman. They grow bored with the game and start to impersonate Aunt Lupe, with her blind mannerisms and confused mental state. They do not realize that the day they mock her, she dies. As a result, all of Esperanza's family thinks that she is going to hell.

Born Bad Analysis

Soon after Esperanza deals with the acceptance of death, she is thrust into a position of misfortune and confusion. While she is trying to become a young woman, cognizant of her world and the inevitabilities of it, she remains stuck in a child's world. She plays with her friends and makes fun of surrounding friends and neighbors. However, only a young adult, with common sense and a conscious will learn to repent and feel remorse for her actions. Esperanza is told that she is a bad person because of her actions. As a result, she feels remorse and feels incomparable frustration and pain for her actions. Only a responsible person will take the punishment for her actions, and Esperanza does so when she makes the unflinching and irreparable comments about her aunt before she dies. Esperanza will live with this pain for the rest of her life, and this remorse aids in her transformation into adulthood.

Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water

Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water Summary

Esperanza visits Elenita, the local witch woman, and pays her $5 to read her cards. She pulls out a card for jealousy, sorrow, and luxury. She tells Esperanza that soon she will go to a wedding and lose an anchor of arms, whatever that means. She also learns that Esperanza will have a house, a home with a heart. This intrigues Esperanza, as she wants to learn more about her future. In the middle of the reading, Elenita stands up to scold, hit, and hug her children, who are fighting relentlessly. When she returns, Esperanza is still sad, confused by her cards. Elenita rereads the cards, realizing that she was correct initially, and that Esperanza will have a home with a heart.

Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water Analysis

In her glimpse into the future, Esperanza learns that she will indeed have her own home someday. This is her principal goal throughout the book. When Elenita advises Esperanza that her one true wish will come true, Esperanza feels uncompromising excitement. However, she is old enough to understand that home is more than simply a roof, attic, basement, and bedroom. She sees Elenita strike her children, sending fear and discomfort into her bones. It is possible that Esperanza sees

Geraldo No Last Name

Geraldo No Last Name Summary

Marin meets a boy named Geraldo at a dance one night. She never learns his last name, though they dance and drink together for hours. When he is hit by a car in a hit-and-run accident, he is rushed to the hospital. Marin spends hours there, speaking to the doctors and police. However, nobody knows his name, nobody knows where he comes from. Unfortunately, he dies, without leaving a name, a legacy. Nobody knows that he rents rooms on a weekly basis, sending money home to another country. His family back home, wherever that is, will always wonder about Geraldo, and how he moved north, and then disappeared.

Geraldo No Last Name Analysis

This poignant chapter borders on sentimental and actively forces the reader into sympathizing with Esperanza and all of the people living on Mango Street. Geraldo's fate is common in the United States; however, it never fails to elicit tears. Despite the fate of this young man, Geraldo remains nameless and unknown to his neighbors. By writing in sole hypothetical situations, Cisneros is able to allow the readers to look at Geraldo in much of the same way that his residents do, and ultimately in the same way that the U.S. government does. Nobody knows exactly where he came from, nobody knows exactly what his name is, and nobody knows exactly what happened to him. He remains an unknown person with no history, coming to America for a better life. Ultimately he loses his life in that attempt, as thousands of people do every year. By putting a face on this contemporary living problem in American society, this chapter brings to life, not only Esperanza's plight, but also the plight of the unknown, unnamed immigrant.

Edna's Ruthie

Edna's Ruthie Summary

Edna is the most exciting adult in the neighborhood and the only woman who plays with Esperanza and her friends. One day, her daughter, Ruthie appears, and moves into her house. The girls play with Ruthie and enjoy spending time with their new friend. However, they never understand why Ruthie lives with her mother when she has a husband and a house somewhere else. Esperanza loves to show Ruthie her books from the library and even tries to recite some of the lines of poetry to her. Ruthie tears when she hears Esperanza speaking, and tells her that it must be nice to read and nice to have such beautiful teeth. Then, Ruthie disappears into her house.

Edna's Ruthie Analysis

The neighbor, Ruthie, introduces Esperanza into an even deeper class clash. As Esperanza blossoms, she also develops a stronger sense of self and sense of identity to her heritage and mostly to Mango Street. However, when she meets a young woman with less education, less prestige, and less hygiene, the divide in American society deepens in her subconscious. She understands that, while she, who has complained about her small house, about her lack of home and lack of heritage, in fact, may be the object of desire for another person. Once again, Esperanza learns that appearance are not always what they seem, and furthermore, that the old cliché that the grass is always greener on the other side, may in fact be the biggest lie of all.

The Earl of Tennessee

The Earl of Tennessee Summary

Earl lives next door to Esperanza in Edna's basement. He works nightshifts somewhere and sleeps during the day with the blinds closed. Occasionally, he comes out during the day to yell at the kids for making too much noise. Rumor has it that Earl has a wife. A few people have seen her, but nobody can agree on her appearance. Some people think she is thin and blonde and other think she is tall and redheaded. However, everyone agrees that when this woman comes around Mango Street, Earl wraps his arms around her, leading her into his basement, and they lock the doors for a short time.

The Earl of Tennessee Analysis

This chapter introduces rumors to Esperanza's world. Everyone in the neighborhood talks about Earl and his inconspicuous wife. However, when she arrives, Earl disappears with her, treating her like property. In this case, rumor may turn out to be fact. Cisneros writes Esperanza's reactions to these characters with more understanding that she does of other relationships she witnesses on Mango Street. As Esperanza has grown into a young woman, she understands exactly what Earl is doing with his wife and why.

Sire

Sire Summary

Sire is a young boy in the neighborhood who looks at Esperanza with hungry eyes. Esperanza decides to look back to him to show that she is not afraid, to be courageous and strong. However, when Esperanza looks to him, she stares for too long and his stares in a way that makes her blood curl. Esperanza wonders why he looks to her that way when he has a girlfriend named Lois, whom he is always taking to the alley. She asks him how he kisses Lois, as her desire to become a woman blossoms.

Sire Analysis

Sire represents the "other," all the men with whom Esperanza will eventually spend time, fall in love, and make love. While she is still an innocent girl, her soul is growing into a mature young woman with desires. While she admits that she does not understand why Sire looks at *her* seductively, when he has a girlfriend, still she knows why he does so. She understands longing between a man and a woman. However, she is not yet old enough to understand relationships, monogamy, and feelings. Her body is growing hot, yet her mind has not yet caught up with it.

Four Skinny Trees

Four Skinny Trees Summary

Esperanza looks to a row of four skinny trees on Mango Street as the only things that understand her. Like Esperanza, they are strong and skinny, with pointy elbows. They do not belong in the neighborhood, just like her. She believes she can hear them speaking, and realizes that Nenny can hear nothing. She knows that their strength is their secret.

"When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at tress. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be" (Cisneros, 94).

Four Skinny Trees Analysis

The four skinny trees on Mango Street represent pillars of strength for Esperanza. They are the only things, she believes, that understand her. The irony in this concept is that trees cannot speak, think, or act. Therefore, in essence, Esperanza is as alone as she believes herself to be. However, trees are also ubiquitous, strong, and seemingly eternal beings. Like the trees, Esperanza hopes to live other places, be strong, and live for years to come.

No Speak English

No Speak English Summary

The man who lives across the street from Esperanza brings his *mamacita* to Mango Street to live with him. She brings a tiny baby with her, when she steps out of the yellow taxicab one day. She is enormously fat, so large in fact that when she moves into the third floor apartment across the street, nobody sees her again. Some people think that she is too fat to move, to walk down three flights of stairs. Other people think she hides away because she cannot speak English. She constantly argues with her son to move back to their home country. However, he screams at her, telling her she must learn English, that this is their home now. They continue to argue, until one day, she hears her baby singing a Pepsi Commercial he learns from the television set in English.

No Speak English Analysis

Esperanza looks into another neighbor's predicament, as she discovers another type of immigrant with problems integrating to America. This chapter explores the problems, again, of trying to find and define a home. While *mamacita* desperately wants to return to the home she knows and loves, she ultimately discovers that it is impossible to return to a previous life. Her son has already grown into a young American boy, by virtue of commercial influence and surroundings. This chapter pinpoints the problems of generation gaps. Despite nationality, there will always be a language barrier between parent and child. It is simply more pronounced with *mamacita* and her baby boy. Additionally, the language barrier between adults is equally powerful. However, this barrier can easily be split, depending on desire, skill, and opportunity.

Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays

Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays Summary

Rafaela is a young beautiful woman who lives down the street from Esperanza. She is married to an older man, who constantly locks her inside. Esperanza sees her because she is always staring out the window, sitting on her elbows, wishing that she were Rapunzel or some other woman who could go and dance at the club down the street. In exchange for a dollar, Esperanza and her friend purchase Coconut and Papaya juice for her often, and give it to her via a paper bag on a string.

Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays Analysis

Rafaela represents the sad lonely woman Esperanza describes at the onset of the book. She is the woman Esperanza never wants to become, fighting that presence, that birthright (according to her name, she believes) with all of her power and presence. Perhaps because she sees the sad reality of Rafaela's situation, Esperanza tries to help her in any way she can. Perhaps bringing Coconut and Papaya juice to Rafaela is the one step Esperanza can do to illustrate her difference in the world. If she helps a woman who stares out the window, then she will never be that woman who stares out the window.

Sally

Sally Summary

Sally lives on Mango Street and befriends Esperanza. Sally is beautiful, with eyes like Cleopatra and long black silky hair. However, despite her beauty, her father does not allow her to enjoy it, to dance, or to wear black. Sally wants to wear black shoes, like Esperanza, but she says her father claims that their religion does not allow it. Esperanza wonders if Sally wants to leave, to walk away, keep going far away from her house, from Mango Street, and from her father.

Sally Analysis

Sally represents another girl that Esperanza fears she will become in time. Sally seems to be a younger version of Rafaela. They are both beautiful women who seem to fall under the wrath of the men in their lives: husband and father. As a result, Esperanza also wants to help Sally. However, there is little she can do at this point, as Sally's needs are so great. Esperanza realizes that sometimes there is nothing to do in a dangerous situation except go elsewhere. By meeting these girls and having friendships with her neighbors, Esperanza starts to realize that perhaps her life is not as bad as she initially believed it to be.

Minerva Writes Poems

Minerva Writes Poems Summary

Minerva is a young girl in the neighborhood, just a touch older than Esperanza, who lives with a horrible stint of bad luck, according to the girls. She has two children and a husband who has run out on her. Esperanza and Minerva write poems together and talk about Minerva's husband who keeps running away. One day, Minerva comes over to Esperanza all black and blue. Yet, her husband returns, apologizes, and she takes him back. The fighting, beating, leaving, and returning occur on a regular basis.

Minerva Writes Poem Analysis

Minerva, again, represents another role that Esperanza is lucky to escape. While Minerva is slightly older than Esperanza, she inhabits a role far too old for any young teenager to hold. Perhaps, she helps Esperanza explore her poetry, or perhaps she helps Esperanza realize what type of life she never wants to have. Nonetheless, Minerva exposes Esperanza to friendship through language, poetry, and a world that cannot be healed through mere language and poetry. Esperanza will take this knowledge with her as she grows. While poetry can heal the soul, it cannot necessarily heal the bruises.

Bums in the Attic

Bums in the Attic Summary

Esperanza's family takes drives up to the hills on Sundays where her father works, just to look around and see the beautiful houses. Esperanza grows tired of this activity, as she hates to look at the houses so close to the stars. She thinks that her family looks too hungry by doing such an activity. Nenny thinks she is stuck up, while the rest of the family thinks that she is just getting too old for this. "People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week's garbage or fear of rats. Night comes. Nothing wakes them but the wind" (Cisneros 108).

Still, Esperanza hopes that one day she will have enough money to own her own house. She will never forget where she comes from, however, and she believes that when bums come knocking on her door, she will always take them in. She will give them room in her attic, and when people wonder what all the noise is upstairs, thinking it rats, she will just tell them that she has bums in her attack.

Bums in the Attic Analysis

When Esperanza parallels the notion of housing bums in her attic, a mature and honest beauty is evident in her character. She not only wants a house of her own, but she realizes that people are around who are far less fortunate than she is. As a result, she makes it a point to help them, no matter what her future circumstances will be. She is not necessarily growing old for stargazing. In fact, she is growing old to simply watch. She wants to act and help.

Beautiful & Cruel

Beautiful & Cruel Summary

Esperanza thinks of herself as the ugly daughter who nobody comes to visit. Nenny has beautiful eyes and Esperanza thinks that beautiful people like Nenny can talk about leaving home all the time, because they are pretty and have fewer worries. Esperanza does not want to spend all her life waiting for a husband to come and take her away, nor does she want to be like Minerva's sister, is kicked out of her home because she has a baby. Despite her looks, Esperanza claims to have a new plan. She will not be one of the red-lipped women in the movies who can play with men like toys. She will grow up rugged, leave the dinner table like a man, and never pick up her plates.

Beautiful & Cruel Analysis

After analyzing her looks and recalling all of her friends on Mango Street, an older and wiser Esperanza makes a prediction for her future. This chapter, strategically placed near the end of the book, comprises Esperanza's desires in a coherent format. All of her wishes from the book, from having a home to having good relationships, to helping those around her, are placed into deliberate thought in this chapter. She can understand the intentions of men, the motives and manipulations of women, and realizes what role she plans to play in her future. She is stepping foot into the woman she will be, and it is far from the glamour of the movies. She will be her own woman, with a combination of male robustness and independence.

A Smart Cookie

A Smart Cookie Summary

Esperanza's mother tells her that she could have been somebody. She was a smart cookie, talented and beautiful. She sings opera, draws, and has brains. However, now she only cooks and draws with a needle and thread. Sometimes she sings to Madame Butterfly in the morning, spellbinding Esperanza and her brothers and sisters. Esperanza's mother tells her that she needs to go to school and always follow her brains. She used to have brains, but not the right clothes. That is her reason for never having made something of herself.

A Smart Cookie Analysis

Esperanza's mother advises her daughter on her past. While Esperanza has now grown into an intelligent young woman, has observed all sorts of women around her, and is truly forming opinions of her own, her mother throws her past at her. By forcefully telling Esperanza what sort of future she initially intended, she is warning Esperanza that dreams are only dreams. You have to actually take action and make something of those dreams in order for them to come true. This advice will remain as an imprint in Esperanza's mind as she travels outward to make her dreams come true. Esperanza will not want to tell her children that she could have been somebody. She wants to tell them that they can be somebody, just like her.

What Sally Said

What Sally Said Summary

Sally is a young, heavy girl in the neighborhood who always comes to school with bruises and marks, she claims, were from falling down the stairs. Nobody believes her, though, as she is large and cannot possibly fall down stairs. Everybody knows her father beats her, as she is his only daughter and all his sons ran away. One day, Sally comes over to stay with Esperanza for a bit. However, her father knocks on the door, crying and begging her to come home. Soon after returning home, Sally is found with another enormous bruise. Sally does not show up for school again. "Until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (Cisneros 114).

What Sally Said Analysis

When Esperanza's friend, Sally, visits her at home, Esperanza notices all of her bruises. Sally represents yet another element of society into which Esperanza could fall. However, Sally's predicament is even more tangible, as we can see her pain on her skin and in her voice. This friend, as opposed to the others, in fact comes into her home. This friend, as opposed to all the others, is also pulled away from it via visible force. Esperanza witnesses Sally's demise and understands why she is the way she is. This friendship is yet another examples of Esperanza's strength and pride.

The Monkey Garden

The Monkey Garden Summary

There is a house on Mango Street that Esperanza used to think belonged to a Monkey family. However, they have moved to Kentucky and left the house empty and alone. Still, Esperanza looks to the backyard as a garden, jungle, and refuge where she and her friends can play.

One day, Sally and Esperanza are playing near the monkey garden, when Sally starts to talk to Tito and his friends. They tease her, but she does not seem to mind. Esperanza goes away to play in the garden; however, when she returns, Sally is acting upset with Tito. They stole her keys and will not return them until she kisses them. Esperanza flees for backup up three flights of stairs until she finds Tito's mother. Tito's mother mocks her, thinking nothing is wrong downstairs in the garden. Then, when Esperanza runs back down to help her friend with a brick in hand, Sally tells her to go away. She runs far away, crying and hiding her face.

The Monkey Garden Analysis

The monkey garden brings Esperanza seemingly full circle, as she is confronted with her burgeoning sexuality once more. She plays with her friend Sally in a previous venue of their childhood joy. When Sally appears to enjoy the attention she gets from the men, Esperanza feels desperate and confused. Her demonstration of aid for her friend illustrates a large heart and deep need to bring happiness to those she loves. When she is deceived, she is hurt. Her quick rush of tears parallels her emotional need to give and take. If people want help, she is the first person to give it. However, if she is wronged, she will wear her emotions so much on her sleeve, that they are evident to all around.

Red Clowns

Red Clowns Summary

Esperanza is angry with Sally for leaving her alone near the Red Clowns at the Carnival. She is angry with Sally for telling her that it is fun, the first time. She is angry with Sally, when she goes off with a boy, leaving her all alone, until another boy pulls her away by her arm. She is hurt and wants him to stop touching her. She thinks Sally a liar, when she remembers the boy telling her he likes her and calls her a Spanish girl. He tells her that he loves her as he touches her.

Red Clowns Analysis

This chapter forcefully places the reader inside Esperanza's confused mindset. She desperately wants to keep her friend, Sally, but is angry with her for leaving her alone. She internalizes her frustration and anger with her friend, yet does nothing to stop the boy from touching her. Because she can feel emotions, yet does not act on them, we see her tortured and confused mind. She is too young still to overtly make decisions. She is still unclear on what is right and what is wrong. However, she feels let down and uncomfortable, and mostly she feels violated. While she sees that her friend Sally is indeed enjoying herself, somehow inside she believes that maybe she should be enjoying this attention from men as well. However, she is not. Her body is growing into a beautiful young woman, yet inside she is still unopened, simply the burgeoning seed of a flower not yet ready to bloom.

Linoleum Roses

Linoleum Roses Summary

Sally gets married and moves away. Esperanza is sad, but she knows that Sally really wanted to escape and just might love her husband. Her husband is a marshmallow salesman she meets at the Carnival, and they run off to get married in a state that allows weddings before eighth grade. Esperanza is sad, because she cannot visit her friend often. Sally's husband gives her money to buy things, and she enjoys this aspect of being married. However, he doesn't allow her to look out the window or spend time with her friends. Still, she enjoys looking at the things they own together: a toaster, towels, and the linoleum floor with roses.

Linoleum Roses Analysis

Sally embodies the lonely woman that Esperanza looked at in her youth, in the beginning of the book, and the woman she never wants to become. In this chapter, she realizes the sadness, constraints, and unfortunate fate of her friend, Sally, partially realizing that her life will never be free, independent, and happy. Yet, at the same time, Esperanza can internalize the problems she knows her friend will face. She tries to understand the reasons for Sally's marriage and realizes that, although her husband may be a tyrant, he is still better than her father at home is. This tragic conflict forces Esperanza into thinking as an adult. While Sally is literally a child bride, a girl caught in a woman's world, Esperanza is just that, as well. She is a girl caught in an adult's world on Mango Street. She is still young, and she should be playing with her friends in the trees, but she must confront the problems of society. She must look at domestic violence, familial violence, and must weight the options that her friend – and by extension – she has. Her friend Sally might not have had the strength to fight for her own life, her own freedom. However, by witnessing Sally's misfortune, she can learn for herself.

The Three Sisters

The Three Sisters Summary

When Lucy and Rachel's baby sister dies, all of their extended family comes to help with the funeral arrangements. They have three aunts, all of whom smell like cinnamon and carry with them a special quality. One has cat-eyes, one has marble hands, and one laughs loudly like tin. They pull Esperanza over to speak with her, asking her to open her palms so that they can read. They tell her that she is special and will go places. They also tell her that she must always remember who she is and that she is Mango Street. She must never forget that. Then, Esperanza runs off to see Rachel and Lucy on the corner outside the house. They wonder what she is doing talking to the three odd sisters. Esperanza never sees them again.

The Three Sisters Analysis

Esperanza sees the three old women as futuristic images of herself. They may symbolize the three witches from mythology, the three witches from *Macbeth*, the three sirens from the Odyssey, or any other classic storyline. As this book is a collection of stories, akin to an odyssey, these three women foretell the future for Esperanza. She is mesmerized by their presence and drawn to it. While she may not realize it at the time, these three women simply inform Esperanza of something she already knows. She is a part of Mango Street, and Mango Street is a part of her. It will never leave her, no matter how hard she tries and no matter how far she travels.

Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps

Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps Summary

Esperanza is envious of Alicia because she has a home in Guadalajara and a small change purse with the name printed on it denoting this special abode. Alicia tells her that she also has a home, that she is Mango Street. Esperanza is still embarrassed by her home and cannot bear to think of herself as coming from this place. She does not want to return to it and plans never to do so until it is fixed up. However, they both laugh when they think of the mayor or anyone coming to Mango Street to fix it.

Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps Analysis

Esperanza is having difficulty coming to terms with the fact that her home is in fact Mango Street and all the worlds like it. While she does have a city back in Mexico with which she can trace her heritage, she never lived there. As a result, she is envious of people with outside homes. She does not want to accept that Mango Street and the raggedy old house in red is her immediate heritage. People around her do not think of having such a home as a bad thing. Esperanza, at this point, realizes that maybe Mango Street is her home, but she never wants to stay in it. When she plans to leave and only come back when it is nicer, she accepts the fact that her home will never be nice. While she does not want to accept that Mango Street is her home, she can accept that it is what it is. It is a multi-cultural neighborhood in Chicago, forgotten by the government and shunned by the suburbanites.

A House of My Own

A House of My Own Summary

Esperanza envisions her own dream home. It is not an apartment or flat, or a home that looks like her father's or any man's. It will have a porch and petunias, and a place to put her books and stories. "Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (Cisneros 132).

A House of My Own Analysis

Esperanza begins to have concrete fantasies about her future homes. As opposed to the early chapters of her dreamlike images, these descriptions of homes have faces; they have specific details more mature and accurate than in the beginning. As Esperanza describes her dream home, she realizes that it is not necessarily the size or the area, but rather the contents that make it her own. Her personality has developed over the course of the book, and as readers, we have shared in that growth. Therefore, when she cites petunias and books as the centerpieces to her future home, we know exactly what she describes.

Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes

Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes Summary

Esperanza loves to tell stories, she says. She is always writing down stories and talking about leaving. She talks about living on Loomis Street, on Keeler Street, but mostly about living on Mango Street in the little red house. She writes about this street so that it becomes a ghost and will not hurt her so deeply. However, the ghost always returns. She dreams of packing up and leaving Mango, saying goodbye to it. But, she knows deep down, that she can never leave, nor does she want to.

"Friends and neighbors will say, what happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros 134).

Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes Analysis

Esperanza looks back to her time on Mango Street, now with the voice of a young adult. The book opens and closes with Esperanza's grand vision of Mango Street. It is as if Cisneros has book-ended Esperanza's life with a naïve and mature visualization of her house on Mango Street. At this point, Esperanza knows that she will return. She will leave and become somebody with her stories, her writing, and her books. Yet despite all of her independence and growth, Esperanza desperately clings to the ideal of home, and it is here in Mango Street where she knows it lies. She enters this house wanting to leave, and leaves the house wanting to stay. While she does not necessarily want to remain on Mango Street physically, she knows her spirit will always remain, lingering in the little red house by the trees.

Characters

Alicia

"Alicia Who Sees Mice" is a young woman burdened by taking care of her family while attending college in order to escape her way of life in the *barrio.* She is only afraid of mice, which serve as a metaphor for her poverty.

Cathy

Cathy, "Queen of Cats," as Esperanza calls her because of her motley collection of felines, is one of Esperanza's neighborhood playmates. Cathy tells Esperanza that she and her family are leaving because the neighborhood into which Esperanza has just moved is going downhill.

Carlos Cordero

Carlos is Esperanza's younger brother. The brothers have little interaction with Esperanza and Nenny outside of the structure of the household.

Esperanza Cordero

"In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters,'" says Esperanza Cordero. In a child-like voice, Esperanza records impressions of the world around her. Her perceptions range from humorous anecdotes pulled from life in the *barrio* to more dark references to crime and sexual provocation. Through Esperanza's eyes, the reader catches short yet vivid glimpses of the other characters, particularly the females in Esperanza's neighborhood. In part, Esperanza finds her sense of self-identity among these women. With a sense of awe and mystery, for example, she looks to older girls who wear black clothes and makeup. She experiments with womanhood herself in "The Family of Little Feet," a story in which Esperanza and her friends cavort about the neighborhood in high heel shoes, but are forced to flee when they attract unwanted male attention. Esperanza's sense of self-identity is also interwoven with her family's house, which emerges throughout the book as an important metaphor for her circumstances. She longs for her own house, which serves as a symbol of the stability, financial means, and sense of belonging that she lacks in her environment "a house all my own-Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem."

As the stories develop, Esperanza matures. She turns from looking outward at her world to a more introspective viewpoint that reveals several sides of her character. Esperanza is a courageous girl who recognizes the existence of a bigger world beyond her constraining neighborhood, and who, toward the end of the book, is compelled by her

own inner strength to leave the *barrio.* Nonetheless, Esperanza demonstrates empathy for those around her, particularly those who do not see beyond the confines of their situations: "One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, what happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all these books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out". In "Binus in the Attic,"' Esperanza says, "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who or where I came from." The tension between Esperanza's emotional ties to this community and her desire to transcend it establish a sense of attraction and repulsion that characterize the work.

Kiki Cordero

Kiki, "with hair like fur,"' is Esperanza's younger brother.

Magdalena Cordero

"Nenny" is Esperanza's younger sister. Esperanza sees her little sister as childish and unable to understand the world as she does: "Nenny is too young to be my friend. She's just my sister and that was not my fault. You don't pick your sisters, you just get them and sometimes they come like Nenny." However, because the two girls have brothers, Esperanza understands that Nenny is her own responsibility to guide and protect Esperanza and Nenny share common bonds both as sisters and as Chicana females. In the story "Laughter,"' a certain neighborhood house reminds both sisters of Mexico, a connection possible only because of their shared experience: "Nenny says: Yes, that's Mexico all right. That's what I was thinking exactly."

Mama Cordero

Esperanza's mother is typical of the women in Latin American communities whose life is defined by marriage, family, children, and traditionally female activities. Mama reveals herself as a superstitious figure who tells Esperanza that she was born on an evil day and that she will pray for her. Mania operates as a caretaker and has authority over her household, and she is portrayed as a martyr, sacrificing her own needs for those of her family. "I could've been somebody, you know?" Mania proclaims to Esperanza, explaining that she left school because she was ashamed that she didn't have nice clothes. Mama wishes for her daughters a better life outside the cycle of subjugation that characterizes her own, and she views education as the ticket out of that way of life.

Nenny Cordero

See Magdalena Cordero

Papa Cordero

Esperanza's father is portrayed as a man burdened with the obligation of providing for his family. Papa holds up a lottery ticket hopefully as he describes to the family the house they will buy one day in the story "Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark," Papa reveals his vulnerability to Esperanza, his eldest child, when he learns of his own father's death and asks her to convey the news to her siblings while he returns to Mexico for the funeral.

Earl

This man with a southern accent, a jukebox repairman according to Esperanza, appears in the story "The Earl of Tennessee." He occupies a dark basement apartment and brings home women of ill repute whom Esperanza and her friends naively take to be his wife.

Elenita

Elenita, "Witch woman" who tells fortunes with the help of Christian icons, tarot cards, and other accouterments, tells Esperanza after reading her cards that she sees a "home in the heart. This leaves Esperanza disappointed that a "real house" does not appear in her future.

Louie

The oldest in a family of girls, Lonie and his family rent a basement apartment from Meme Ortiz's mother. His cousin Marin lives with the family and helps take care of his younger sisters. Although Lonie is really her brother's friend, Esperanza notices that he "has two cousins and that his t-shirts never stay tucked in his pants"

Lucy

Lucy is a neighborhood girl whom Esperanza befriends even though her clothes "are crooked and old." Lucy and her sister Rachel are among the first friends Esperanza makes when she moves onto Mango Street.

Mamacita

In "No Speak English," Mamacita is the plump mother of a man across the street, a comic and tragic figure who stays indoors all the time because of her fear of speaking English.

Marin

Marin is a Puerto Rican neighbor, an older girl with whom Esperanza and her friends are fascinated. Marin wears makeup, sells Avon, and has a boyfriend in Puerto Rico whom she secretly intends to marry, but meanwhile, she is responsible for the care of her younger cousins.

Minerva

Minerva is a young woman not much older than Esperanza who "already has two kids and a husband who left "

Juan Ortiz

"Meme" is a neighbor of Esperanza's who has a large sheepdog "The dog is big, like a man dressed in a dog suit, and runs the same way its owner does, clumsy and wild and with the limbs flopping all over the place like untied shoes"

Meme Ortiz

See Juan Ortiz

Rachel

Rachel is Lucy's sister, a sassy girl according to Esperanza. Esperanza and Lucy parade around the neighborhood in high heel shoes with her in the story "The Family of Little Feet."

Rafaela

Rafaela stays indoors and observes the world from her window-sill, "because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" Rafaela stands as a symbol for the interior world of women on Mango Street, whose lives are circumscribed and bound by the structure of home and family.

Ruthie

Ruthie, "the only grown-up we know who likes to play," is a troubled, childlike woman whose husband left her and was forced to move from her own house in the suburbs back to Mango Street with her mother.

Sally

Sally wears black clothes, short skirts, nylons, and makeup. Esperanza looks upon her with fascination and wonder, and wants to emulate her, but the dark side of Sally's life is revealed in her relationship with her abusive father. She trades one type of ensnarement for another by marrying a marshmallow salesman before the eighth grade.

Sire

Sire is a young man who leers at Esperanza as she walks down the street, provoking in her inextricable feelings of desire, foreboding, and fear. Esperanza says that "it made your blood freeze to have somebody look at you like that."

The Three Sisters

"The Three Sisters" are Rachel and Lucy's elderly aunts who come to visit when Rachel and Lucy's baby sister dies. The three ladies recognize Esperanza's strong-willed nature, and plead with her not to forget the ones she leaves behind on Mango Street when she flees from there one day.

Rosa Vargas

In the story, "There Was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do," Rosa is portrayed as a woman left in the lurch by a husband who abandoned her and their unruly kids. "They are bad those Vargas, and how can they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come."

Themes

Coming of Age

Through various themes in *The House on Mango Street* Esperanza reveals herself as both a product of the community in which she lives and one of the only figures courageous enough to transcend her circumstances. Like all adolescents, Esperanza struggles to forge her own identity. In many respects, Esperanza's own keen observations and musings about the women in her neighborhood are her way of processing what will happen to her in the future and what is within her power to change. On the one hand, she is surrounded by adolescent myths and superstitions about sexuality. In the story "Hips," the adolescent Esperanza contemplates why women have hips: "The bones just one day open. One day you might decide to have kids, and then where are you going to put them?"

Esperanza boldly experiments with the trappings of womanhood by wearing high heels in "The Family of Little Feet," and in "Sally," she looks enviously to the girl as an image of maturity: "My mother says to wear black so young is dangerous, but I want to buy shoes just like yours." However, Esperanza's brushes with sexuality are dangerous and negative in "The First Job" and "Red Clowns," and she feels betrayed by the way love is portrayed by her friends, the movies, and magazines. Esperanza observes characters such as Sally, Minerva, and Rafaela, who, through early and abusive marriages, are trapped in the neighborhood and into identifying themselves through their male connections. After witnessing this, Esperanza says in "Beautiful & Cruel," "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain." Esperanza also forges her identity through the metaphor of the house. Her longing for a house of her own underscores her need for something uplifting and stable with which she can identify. Throughout the book there is a tension between Esperanza's ties to the *barrio* and her impressions of another kind of life outside of it Ultimately, Esperanza's ability to see beyond her immediate surroundings allows her to transcend her circumstances and immaturity.

Culture and Heritage Difference

Esperanza keenly observes the struggles of Hispanic Americans who wish to preserve the essence of their heritage while striving to forge productive lives within American culture. It is through the sordid details of the lives of Esperanza' s neighbors that we glimpse the humorous, moving, and tragic sides of these struggles. Esperanza's community serves as a microcosm of Latinos in America, and her own identity is interwoven with the identity of the neighborhood. People in the *barrio* relate to one another because of a shared past and current experience. In "Those Who Don't," Esperanza considers the stereotypes and fears that whites have of Latinos and vice versa Cisneros weaves together popular beliefs, traditions, and other vestiges of the countries from which she and her neighbors trace their ancestry. In "No Speak English,"

for example, an old woman paints her walls pink to recall the colorful appearance of the houses in Mexico, a seemingly hopeless gesture in the drab underbelly of Chicago. She wails when her grandson sings the lyrics to an American television commercial but cannot speak Spanish. The tragic Mamacita risks losing her identity if she assimilates, like her little grandson, into American culture. In "Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water," the so-called "witch woman" of the neighborhood preserves the old wives' tales, superstitions, and traditional remedies for curing headaches, forgetting an old flame, and curing insomnia.

Despite these ties to the past, Esperanza leaves no doubt that she is destined to leave this neighborhood for a bigger world outside the *barrio,* an allusion to her dual cultural loyalties. Esperanza believes that one day she will own her own house outside the neighborhood. However, she also leaves no doubt that she will return one day for those unable to leave the environment on their own. In "Bums in the Attic," for example, she describes how she will let bums sleep in the attic of her house one day, "because I know how it is to be without a house." In "The Three Sisters,"' Esperanza gives further foreshadowing that she will one day leave Mango Street, but will return to help others. "You will always be Mango Street,"' three ladles tell her. "You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are." Esperanza leaves the reader with the notion that she will leave but will not forget her roots. Though she does not always want to belong to this environment, she realizes that her roots are too strong to resist The books and papers Esperanza takes with her at the end of the book are her means of freedom from the ugly house and the social constraints on the neighborhood.

Gender Roles

The House on Mango Street is dedicated "a las Mujeres"-to the women. As the narrator, Esperanza offers the reader the greatest insights into the lives of female characters, One of the most enduring themes of the book is the socialization of females within Chicano society based on the fixed roles of the family. Cisneros explores the dynamics of women's lives within this precarious and male-dominated society, where the conditions of females are predetermined by economic and social constraints. For most women in the neighborhood, these constraints are too powerful to overcome. However, Esperanza possesses the power to see beyond her circumstances and the world of the ghetto, while those around her fall prey to it and perpetuate its cycle. Esperanza's mother is typical of a Hispanic woman grounded in this way of life.

Throughout the book, Esperanza deals with themes of womanhood, especially the role of single mothers. The interior world of females whose lives are tied to activities inside the house is contrasted with the external world of males, who go to work and operate in society at large. In "'Boys & Girls,"' for example, Esperanza notes the difference between herself and her brothers: "'The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls,"

Esperanza offers a feminine view of growing up in a Chicano neighborhood in the face of a socialization process that keeps women married, at home, and immobile within the society. The women in this book face domineering fathers and husbands, and raise children, often as single parents, under difficult circumstances. Many tales have tragic sides, such as those that paint the constrained existence of some of the women and girls in the neighborhood under the strong arm of husbands or fathers. The story "There was an Old Woman She Had So Many Children She Didn't Know What to Do," tells of an abandoned young wife and her unruly children. In "Linoleum Roses," Sally is not allowed to talk on the phone or look out the window because of a jealous, domineering husband. Girls marry young in this society: "Minerva is only a little bit older than me but already she has two kids and a husband who left." But Esperanza is a courageous character who defies the stereotypes of Chicanas. She laments the attitudes that prevail in her community. Of her name, Esperanza says, "It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female-but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong." It is Esperanza's power to see beyond the barriers of her neighborhood, fueled by her education gained through reading and writing, that keep her from being trapped in the same roles as the women who surround her.

Style

Point of View

The House on Mango Street is narrated by the adolescent Esperanza, who tells her story in the form of short, vivid tales. The stories are narrated in the first person ("I"), giving the reader an intimate glimpse of the girl's outlook on the world. Although critics often describe Esperanza as a childlike narrator, Cisneros said in a 1992 interview in *Interviews with Writers* of *the Post-Colonial World:* "If you take Mango Street and translate it, it's Spanish. The syntax, the sensibility, the diminutives, the way of looking at inanimate objects-that's not a child's voice as is sometimes said. That's Spanish! I didn't notice that when I was writing it." Incorporating and translating Spanish expressions literally into English, often without quotation marks, adds a singular narrative flavor that distinguishes Cisneros's work from that of her peers.

Setting

The House on Mango Street is set in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago. Esperanza briefly describes some of the rickety houses in her neighborhood, beginning with her own, which she says is "small and red with tight steps in front." Of Meme Ortiz's house, Esperanza says that "Inside the floors slant-And there are no closets. Out front there are twenty-one steps, all lopsided and jutting like crooked teeth." Mamacita's son paints the inside walls of her house pink, a reminder of the Mexican home she left to come to America. The furniture in Elena's house is covered in red fur and plastic. Esperanza gives the impression of a crowded neighborhood where people live in close quarters and lean out of windows, and where one can hear fighting, talking, and music coming from other houses on the street. Esperanza describes the types of shops in the concrete landscape of Mango Street: a laundromat, a junk store, the comer grocery. Cats, dogs, mice, and cockroaches make appearances at various times. However, while Esperanza gives fleeting glimpses of specific places, the images that the girl paints of her neighborhood are mostly understood through the people that inhabit it.

Structure

Just like Esperanza, whose Identity isn't easy to define, critics have had difficulty classifying *The House on Mango Street.* Is it a collection of short stories? A novel? Essays? Autobiography? Poetry? Prose poems? The book is composed of very short, loosely organized vignettes. Each stands as a whole in and of itself, but collectively the stories cumulate in a mounting progression that creates an underlying coherence; the setting remains constant, and the same characters reappear throughout the tales. Cisneros once explained: "I wanted to write stories that were a cross between poetry and fiction-[I] wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point Without having any knowledge of what came before or after." Despite the disjunctive

nature of the stories, as they evolve, Esperanza undergoes a maturation process, and she emerges at the end showing a more courageous and forthright facade.

Imagery

Despite certain underlying threads that link the tales in *The House on Mango Street,* the stories nonetheless remain disembodied from the kind of master narrative that typifies much of American fiction. The stories have a surreal and fragmented quality consistent with short, impressionistic glimpses into the mind of Esperanza. Rather than relying on long descriptive and narrative sequences that characterize many novels in English, Cisneros reveals dialogue and evokes powerful imagery with *few* words. With a minimum number of words, Cisneros includes humorous elements like the nicknames of her playmates, family, and neighbors-Nenny, Meme, and Kiki, for example. But she also, with few descriptive elements, evokes the ugliness of violence and sexual aggression swirling around her in the *barrio.* The author's carefully crafted, compact sentences convey poignant meanings that can be read on different levels. Seemingly simple dialogue reveals deeper, underlying concerns of the narrator. A straightforward dialogue between Esperanza and Nenny about a house that reminded the girls of Mexico in the story "Laughter," for example, evokes the connection of the girls to one another and to the country of their heritage. The bizarre yet moving experiences of Esperanza evoke a social commentary but do not explicitly state it. Cisneros strikes a tenuous balance between humor and pathos, between tragic and comic elements.

Symbols

Several important symbolic elements characterize *The House on Mango Street.* First, the Image of the house is a powerful one. The house that Esperanza lives in-small, crooked, drab-contrasts with the image of the house that Esperanza imagines for herself in "Bums in the Attic". "I want a house on a hill-like the ones with the gardens where Papa works." But the metaphor of the house is more than pure materialism. The house represents everything that Esperanza does not have-financial means and pleasant surroundings-but more importantly; it represents stability, triumph, and transcendence over the pressures of the neighborhood. Throughout the book, especially in stories such as "The House on Mango Street," and "A Rice Sandwich,"_ Esperanza struggles with the embarrassment of poverty: "You live *there?* The way she [aunt] said it made me feel like nothing. *There.* I lived *there."* Another important symbol in the book are the trappings of womanhood-shoes, makeup, black clothes-that fascinate and intimidate the adolescent Esperanza, who carefully observes the other women in her community. Although at times these signs of womanhood leave Esperanza feeling betrayed, in "Beautiful & Cruel," she sees them as potential for power. "In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. 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."

Tone

Cisneros's writing is often compared to music for its poetic, lyrical quality. *The House on Mango Street* has a strong aural character, and the author clearly has an interest in sound that comes through in much of her poetry. Esperanza speaks in a singsong voice, with the repetitive quality of a nursery rhyme. Cisneros's tone is at once youthful and lighthearted, but displays a tragic or menacing tone at times. Cisneros once commented, "I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with reverberation." In her more recent works, Cisneros has outgrown the girlish voice of Esperanza and takes on more mature themes while retaining this distinctive lyrical quality in her writing.

Historical Context

Mexican Immigration to the United States

Cisneros plays on her dual Mexican American heritage throughout her work, and *The House on Mango Street* in particular reflects the experience of Mexicans in the United States. In the mid-nineteenth century, Mexico ceded its northern territories (present-day California, Arizona, and New Mexico) to the United States at the end of the Mexican War, and Mexican landowners lost many of their rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. From about 1900 to 1920, immigrants from Mexico were actively recruited into the United States as low-cost labor for railroad, mining, and other industries, especially throughout the southwestern United States. Mexican immigration was widespread and unregulated through the 1920s, when immigration from Mexico and some other countries hit its peak. Between World War I and World War II, however, Mexican immigration came to a halt due in part to the pressures of the Great Depression, and Mexican Americans faced repatriation, poverty, and rampant discrimination.

Despite their contribution and service to the U.S. Army during World War n, Mexican Americans continued to face discrimination upon returning home after World War n. For example, many Mexican Americans were treated like second-class citizens. And throughout the fifties and sixties, despite their eagerness to integrate more fully into American society, Mexican Americans were still treated as "outsiders" by mainstream American culture. Despite their push for civil rights throughout the 1960s and the *1970s,* many Chicanos still faced discrimination that limited opportunities for advancement. By 1983, when *The House on Mango Street* was published, stringent U.S. immigration laws had long limited the number of Mexicans who were allowed to immigrate to the United States. Those who had immigrated legally or been born in America still experienced stereotyping and biases in American culture at large. In "Those Who Don't," Cisneros evokes the stereotyping of Mexican Americans: "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives."

Because of the discrimination often leveled at Spanish-speaking populations by English-speaking Americans, many Mexican Americans choose to resist speaking Spanish except among family within the privacy of their homes. Cisneros, for example, remembers that she only spoke Spanish with her father at home, while otherwise being fully integrated within the mainstream American educational system. On the other hand, other Mexican Americans, particularly those of the older generations who retained a nostalgia for their mother country, never relinquished the use of Spanish as their primary tongue. In *The House on Mango Street,* for example, Mamacita consciously refused *to* speak English because for her It represented a blatant rejection of her past and her identity, and she limited her English vocabulary to "He not here," "No speak English," and "Holy smokes." Esperanza's father remembers eating nothing but "hamandeggs" when he first arrived in the United States because it was the only English phrase he knew. In the United States today, there is a renewed interest among

the younger generation of Mexican Americans to learn and more fully appreciate the Spanish language.

Hispanic American Population and Culture

The largest number of Mexican Americans in the United States are concentrated in southern California and Texas, with another sizable population in New York City. As one of the largest cities in the United States, Chicago historically has also attracted Immigrants from around the world, including those from Mexico. Cisneros and her mother were born in the United States, as are many of the characters in *The House on Mango Street.* Nevertheless, they retain strong ties with their Mexican heritage and are integrated into the Mexican American communities throughout the country. In different parts of the country, these groups are referred to as "Mexican American," "Mexicanos," "Chicanos," and sometimes by the more general terms "Hispanics" or "Latinos," which collectively describes people from those cultures colonized by Spain from the fifteenth century to the present, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and many other countries. The population of Hispanics in the United States continues *to* swell, and by some estimates, they will make up about thirteen percent of the nation's population by the early years of the twenty-first century.

Historically, Mexican American men and women have suffered negative stereotyping and prejudices that prevented them from securing desirable jobs and being upwardly mobile within the society. Therefore, many remain concentrated in low-income neighborhoods like the one portrayed in *The House on Mango Street.* Poverty is a reality faced by many Mexican American populations living in the United States. In *The House on Mango Street,* the theme of poverty pervades the stories In "Alicia Who Sees Mice," for example, the mice are a symbol of poverty. Alicia, who

stays up late studying because she "doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pill," sees the mice scurrying around after dark, a symbol of her circumstances in the neighborhood. In *The House on Mango Street,* the source of Esperanza's embarrassment about her house and her circumstances derives from the poverty that many Mexican Americans face. In "Bums in the Attic," the economic disparity between "people who live on hills" and those who live in the *barrio* is clear.

The role of women within the history of the Hispanic community is significant. Although in *The House on Mango Street* and other works by Cisneros, some Mexican American women are portrayed as trapped within a cycle of socialization, Cisneros noted in a 1992 interview in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World,* "I have to say that the traditional role is kind of a myth. The traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman. There's a lot of victimization but we are also fierce. We are very fierce."

Cisneros says she was influenced by American and British writers throughout high school, and she remembers reading works such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland.* But only when she was introduced to the Chicago writing scene in college and graduate school did Cisneros come in contact with Chicano writers. Later, Chicano

writers like Gary Soto, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Alberto Rios were also among her circle of colleagues. Today, Sandra Cisneros stands foremost among Chicana writers who emerged in the 1980s, including Ana Castillo, Denise Cluivez, and Gloria Anzaldua.

Critical Overview

Although *The House on Mango Street* is Cisneros's first novel and appeared without high expectations, over time it has become well known and lauded by critics. Bebe Moore Campbell, writing in *New York Times Book Review,* called *The House on Mango Street* a "radiant first collection." The book, published in 1983, has provided Cisneros broad exposure as a writer. Her works are not numerous, but this book established the author as a major figure in contemporary American literature. Her work has already been the subject of scholarly works by historians of Chicana and women's studies. In 1985, it was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award. Today many high schools and university departments, including Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, English, and Creative Writing, use the book in college courses. Cisneros has read her poetry at several conferences and has won several grants and awards in the United States and abroad.

Critics usually discuss the importance of *The House on Mango Street* in terms of its incisive portrayal of the race-class-gender paradigm that characterizes the Hispanic experience in the United States. The book eloquently expresses the tensions of growing up a minority in a white-dominated society and growing up a woman in a male-dominated society, accompanied by feelings of alienation and loneliness, change and transformation. Like many Chicano writers, Cisneros touches on themes of overcoming the burden of race, gender, and class, with which all the women in the book are strapped to a greater or lesser extent Her vivid and powerful descriptions combined with her funny and compelling dialogue persuasively capture the essence of women's lives within this precarious society.

Critics also comment on the particularly feminine viewpoint of the socialization process that Cisneros offers as an important element of the work. In this regard, Cisneros parallels the work of other Chicana writers, forging a viewpoint heretofore only offered by male Hispanic American authors. Cisneros notes that It has taken longer for female Chicana writers to get educated and make contributions parallel to those of the male Chicano writers who have been publishing works a few decades longer. Esperanza is portrayed as a bold girl who experiments with nontraditional roles of females within her society. "I have begun my own kind of *war.* Simple Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate." Cisneros says that she writes about the things that haunt her from her past "In my writing as well as in that of other Chicanas and other women, there is the necessary phase of dealing with those ghosts and voices most urgently haunting us, day by day."

Throughout her education Cisneros was exposed to mainstream English writing, and thus she began her own writing by imitating these authors. Her first poems were published in the journals *Nuestro* and *Revista Chicano-Riquena,* which gave Cisneros the confidence to turn to major book publishers thereafter. Although *The House on Mango Street* took five years to complete, she found her own voice and her own literary direction. Most critics comment on Cisneros's ability to convey powerful images through short, compact statements, and to vividly portray an experience or feeling in just a few

words. Eduardo F. Elias noted that, "Hers is the work of a poet, a painter with words, who relies on sounds, plural meanings, and resonances to produce rich and varied images in each reader's mind."

Cisneros has won numerous prestigious awards, most notably the 1985 Before Columbus American Book Award, and has read her poetry in public both in the United States and abroad. In the late 1980s, Cisneros spent time in Austin, Texas under a Paisano Dobie Fellowship, and won first and third prizes in the Segundo Concurso Nacional del Cuento Chicano from the University of Arizona for some of her short stories. In 1992 she received a National Endowment for the Arts grant, which permitted her to travel in Europe and develop new themes for her work In the spring of 1993 she was in residence at the Fondation Michael Karolyi in Venice, France. Prior to winning these awards, she taught at Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago from 1978 to 1980. Her work is widely studied in the university and high school settings, and it fits well into different disciplines, including Women's Studies, American literature, and Mexican American history.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Sarbanes, a doctoral candidate at the University of *California-Los Angeles, assesses* The House on Mango Street *as an unusual example of both the novel form and the* bildungsroman *("coming of age" story) as previously explored from the Chicano perspective.*

Sandra Cisneros is a Chicago-born Chicana activist, poet, and fiction writer. She has published two collections of poems, *Bad Boys(1980)* and *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987), and a collection of short stories entitled *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991). Her novel, *The House on Mango Street,* (1983) was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award.

The House on Mango Street is the fictional autobiography of Esperanza Cordera, an adolescent Mexican American girl who wants to be a writer. Unlike the chapters in a conventional novel, the forty-four vignettes, or literary sketches, which make up the novel could each stand on its own as a short story. Read together, they paint a striking portrait of a young Chicana struggling to find a place in her community without relinquishing her sense of self.

Critics have identified the novel as an example of the growing up story, or *bildungsroman,* which forms a general theme of Chicano and Chicana literature. But Cisneros's text differs from the traditional Chicano bildungsroman, in which the boy becomes a man by first acquiring self-sufficiency and then assuming his rightful place as a leader in the community. It also differs from the traditional Chicana bildungsroman, in which the girl must give up her freedom and sense of individuality in order to join the community as a wile and mother The goal of Esperanza, this novel's protagonist and narrator, is to fashion an identity for herself which allows her to control her own destiny and at the same time maintain a strong connection to her community.

The novel's central image is the image of the *house.* The book begins with a description of the Corderos' new house on Mango Street, a far cry from the dream house with "a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" they'd always wanted, the house that would give them space and freedom. Instead, the house on Mango Street is "small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath." Though her parents insist they are only there temporarily, Esperanza knows the move is probably permanent. This is the house, the street, the identity she must now come to terms with one way or another.

As evidenced by her reaction to the new house, Esperanza has a very strong sense of place: both of where she is and of where others are in relation to her. In the opening vignette she tells of when a nun from her school passed by the ramshackle apartment the Cordero family lived in before Mango Street and asked Esperanza in surprise if she lived there. Esperanza confesses "The way she said it made me feel like nothing" Esperanza also struggles with being "placed" by her race and class in houses that are

not hers, as in "rice Sandwich," when another nun assumes she lives in "a row of three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into."

Mango Street is populated by people who feel out of place, caught between two countries-like Mamacita in "No Speak English," who wants to return to Mexico. When her husband insists that the United States is her home and she must learn to speak English, Mamacita "lets out a cry, hysterical' high, as if he had tom the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out." Esperanza herself feels caught between two cultures because of her name: "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver." Rather than be defined by either pronunciation, however, Esperanza asserts: "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X."

As a girl on the cusp of adulthood, Esperanza is particularly concerned with the place of women in Latino culture. In "My Name," she describes how her great-grandmother, also named Esperanza, was forced to marry her great-grandfather and then placed in his house like a "fancy chandelier." The house became for her, as it is for many of the women Esperanza observes, a site of confinement: "she looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow." This Image of the *ventanera* or woman by the window, recurs throughout the novel As Esperanza looks around Mango Street, she sees other women trapped in their houses, women like Rafaela, who gets locked indoors when her husband goes out to play poker because she is too beautiful. Rafaela, who has traded in her own sexuality and independence for security and respectability, wishes she could go to "the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys."

Another *ventanera* is Esperanza's friend Sally, who marries before she has finished eight grade in order to escape her father's house. Rather than freedom, however, a house of her own merely means more restrictions for Sally: her husband does not allow her to talk on the telephone or have friends visit or even look out of the window. Instead, Sally looks at "all the things they own' the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes." But she, too, must give over control of her life to her husband. Cisneros employs conventional romantic imagery to describe her new home: "the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake," but in Sally's case the romance is a trap, the roses and the wedding cake are the floor and ceiling of her cage.

By making the narrator of her novel a preadolescent girl, Cisneros represents Mango Street from the point of view of someone who is not yet placed, not yet put into position. Esperanza's is a voice that can question, a voice of hope (Esperanza), a voice of transition. She is not inside the house looking out, like many of the other girls and women, nor is she outside the community looking in with strange eyes, like the nuns. Often she is out in the street, looking in at the other women-observing, analyzing, evaluating their situation.

In an interview with Pilar Rodriguez-Aranda in the *America's Review,* Cisneros discusses what she perceives to be the two predominant and contradictory images of women in Mexican culture: La Malinche and la Virgen de Guadalupe. The La Malinche myth figures women as sexual, evil, and traitorous. The way history tells it, Malinche was an Aztec noblewoman who was presented to Cortes, the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, and served as his lover, translator, and strategist. This is the historical Malinche, but she has come to stand in Mexican culture for the prostitute, the bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion which put an end to the Aztec empire The Malinche myth is the reason the pretty young women of Mango Street are locked in their houses when their husbands go out. The other image Cisneros mentions in her interview, that of the Virgen de Guadalupe, or Mexican Madonna, encourages women to be self-sacrificing wives and mothers. As demonstrated above, however, it hardly works better for the women in her novel.

There are women in the community, however, who encourage Esperanza to resist both images. There is Alicia, who takes two trains and a bus to her classes at the university because "she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin." There is her mother, who in "Smart Cookie" warns Esperanza against letting the shame of being poor keep her from living up to her potential: "Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains." There is her Aunt Lupe, who encourages her to write poems, telling her "it will keep you free." There are also the "three sisters,"_ three old aunts of Esperanza's friends Lucy and Rachel who come to Mango Street to attend the funeral of their baby sister. Like supernatural beings, the three sisters appear out of nowhere, possessed of mind reading and fortune telling powers. With the image of three sisters Cisneros makes reference to the Fates of Greek mythology, three old crones who know the fate of all human beings. The sisters look at Esperanza's palms and tell her she will go far, but they also tell her that wherever she goes, she will take Mango Street With her. They remind her, too: "You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you."

While Esperanza may not accept the house on Mango Street as her home-that is to say, while she may refuse to accept the self that is handed to her-she *does* ultimately accept Mango Street as a part of herself. She comes to identify with the street itself, that border space which is within the community (within Cillcano culture), but outside of the house (outside of the traditional feminine gender role). As the novel draws to a close, Esperanza begins to realize that storytelling, or writing, is one way to create this relationship between self and community, to carve out her own place in the world: "I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free." But, Esperanza reminds us and herself," I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out." Like Cisneros, Esperanza will free them with her stories.

Source: Janet Sarbanes, in an essay for *Novels for Students.* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Matchie presents The House on Mango Street *as a contemporary parallel to the classic* Adventures of Huckleberry Finn *and* The Catcher in the Rye, *describing the three young protagonists as similarly innocent and vulnerable, and noting that each character develops his or her own identity* in *reaction to a specific environment.*

In 1963 in a collection of articles entitled *Salinger,* Edgar Branch has a piece in which he explores the "literary continuity" between Mark Twain's *The Adventures* of *Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher* In *the Rye.* Branch claims that, though these two books represent different times in American history, the characters, the narrative patterns and styles, and the language are strikingly similar, so that what Salinger picks up, according to Branch, is an archetypal continuity which is cultural as well as literary. I would like to suggest a third link in this chain that belongs to our own time, and that is Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street.* Published in 1989, tills novella is about an adolescent, though this time a girl who uses, not the Mississippi or Manhattan Island, but a house in Chicago, to examine her society and the cultural shibboleths that weigh on her as a young Chicana woman.

Though not commonly accepted by critics as "canonical," *The House on Mango Street* belongs to the entire tradition of the bildungsroman (novel of growth) or the kunstlerroman (novel Inimical to growth), especially as these patterns apply to women. One can go back to 19th-century novels like Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), where a black woman working in the house of a white family in Boston is treated as though she were a slave Later, Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1889) depicts a woman who goes crazy when she is confined to a room in a country house by her husband, a doctor who knows little about feminine psychology. Finally, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), the protagonist literally moves out of the house to escape her Creole husband, but cannot find a male with whom to relate in this patriarchal culture.

In *Mango Street,* a hundred years later, Esperanza is actually part of a six-member family of her own race, but that does not prevent an enslavement parallel to Nig's. Though not limited to a single room as in *Yellow Wallpaper,* Esperanza's house is a symbol of sexual as well as cultural harassment, and she, like the narrator in Gilman's story, is a writer whose colorful images help her create a path to freedom. And as in *The Awakening,* Esperanza dreams of leaving her house, an action that like Edna's is related to all kinds of men who make up the power structure in her Chicana world.

So in a general way Cisneros's novel belongs to a female tradition in which culture and literary quality are important. But for her, far more significant as literary models are Huck Finn and Holden Caufield, primarily because they are adolescents growing up in culturally oppressive worlds. Cisneros's protagonist, like them, is innocent, sensitive, considerate of others, but extremely vulnerable. Like them, Esperanza speaks a child's language, though hers is peculiar to a girl and young budding poet. And like her predecessors, she grows mentally as time goes on; she knows how she feels, and

learns from the inside out what in Holden's terms is "phony," and what with Huck she is willing to "go to hell" for. There are, of course, other Chicano novels that are bildungsromans, such as Tomas Rivera's ... *y no se lo trago la tierra,* but none presents a better parallel to Huck and Holden than Cisneros's Esperanza.

It may seem that the two boy's books are really journeys, while *Mango Street* is limited to a house, and therefore set-the opposite of a geographical quest. But when one looks at the patterns of the 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, something that includes her sexuality and the prominence of writing in her life....

Esperanza actually loves her father, though as with Holden's he is virtually absent from the narrative. As Marcienne Rocard points out [in "The Remembering Voice in Chicana Literature *(Americas Review)]* Chicanas concentrate intensely on "human relationships between generations", something not stressed in Twain and Salinger Esperanza thinks her father is brave; he cries after the death of a grandmother, and his daughter wants to "hold and hold and hold him." But this same father perpetuates a structure that traps women. The girl's mother, for instance, has talent and brains, but lacks practical knowledge about society because, says Esperanza, Mexican men "don't like their women strong." Her insight into an abusive father comes through her best friend Sally, whose father 'just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt." So Sally leaves home for an early unhappy marriage. Another friend, Alicia, goes to the university to break the pattern of her dead mother's "rolling pin and sleepiness," but in studying all night and cooking, too, she begins to imagine that she sees truce, whereupon her father belittles her. Esperanza says Alicia is afraid of nothing, "except four-legged fur. And fathers." Gradually, Esperanza comes to see that the pressure on women in Chicana families comes from a system she simply, though painfully, has to leave....

Truly, all three books are wrought with violence, which the protagonists seem to forgive...

Esperanza also feels for the victims of violence. What is interesting is that she sometimes interprets violence in a broad sense as injustice, or something in society that keeps people homeless, or in shabby housing In the attic of her new house she'll have, not "Rats," but "Burns" because they need shelter. She has visions of the violence done to Geraldo, "another wetback," who rented "two-room flats and sleeping rooms" while he sent money back to Mexico; killed one night by a hit-and-run driver, he (in the minds of his people) simply disappeared That violence becomes worse when individuals are confined to their homes. Mamacita, the big woman across the street, is beautiful but cannot get out because she "No speak English"-a phenomenon doubly tragic because her baby sings Pepsi commercials. But mostly Esperanza identifies with wives mistreated by men who confine them to their homes. Raphaela is locked in because she is too beautiful for her jealous husband. Earl, a jukebox repairman, and Sire, who drinks beer, hold their wives tight lest they relate to anybody else. Things like this make

Esperanza's "blood freeze." She dreams of being held too hard. Once, after letting a man kiss her because he was "so old," she says he "grabs me by the face with both hands and kisses me on the mouth and doesn't let go." So, like Holden and Huck, this girl cares for others because of the violence done to them (and herself) In all lands of contexts...

Ironically, Esperanza already has a family whom she loves, but that does not free her, for her father is gone and her mother stuck. She... longs for friends, talking first about a temporary friend Cathy who then moves away. Later, she takes some of her sister's money to buy a share in a bike with her neighbors Rachel and Lucy so she can play with them, but that is fleeting. As she matures and sees what is happening to people, she picks four trees, winch like her have "skinny necks and pointy elbows." Others, like Nenny, do not appreciate those trees, but for Esperanza, they "teach," helping her to realize that like them she is here and yet does not belong. And like the trees Esperanza, who thinks in images, must continue to reach. Her goal, like that of Huck and Holden, is not to forget her "reason for being" and to grow "despite concrete" so as to achieve a freedom that's not separate from togetherness.

All three protagonists have friends who fail them, usually in some kind of romantic context....

Esperanza's best friend Sally is ... a kind of romantic. She paints her eyes like Cleopatra and likes to dream Tragically, it is Sally who betrays

her friend and admirer in the monkey garden (an animal pen turned old car lot) where she trades the boys' kisses for her lost keys, while all concerned laugh at Esperanza for trying to defend her friend with a brick. Later, Sally leaves Esperanza alone at the fair next to the "red clowns" (at once comical and tragic figures) where she is molested because her romantic friend 'lied." Actually, the whole experience is a lie, given what she had been led to expect.

Still, all three have amoral center, a person they can count on, or should be able to....

[Esperanza] has a little sister, Nenny, for whom she feels responsible. Nenny, however, is ... too little. Esperanza often refers to her as "stupid" and in the chapter on "Hips," where Esperanza is becoming more aware of the sexual role of a woman's body, she says Nenny just "doesn't get it." Her real hope comes in Aunt Lupe who is dying-"diseases have no eyes," says the young poet. In a game the girls invent, they make fun of Lupe, and for this Esperanza, like Huck, feels she will "go to hell." Actually, it is Lupe who listens to the girl's poems and tells her to "keep writing." That counsel becomes the basis of Esperanza's future apart from Mango Street.

It is important to recognize that the three novels contain religious language that at once seems to undercut traditional religion, and in the mouths of the young seems to say more than they realize....

For Esperanza, religion is a cultural thing; in her Catholic world, God the father and Virgin Mother are household terms. But for this young poet, religion takes on mythic or

poetic dimensions. She sees herself, for instance, as a red "balloon tied to an anchor," as if to say she needs to transcend present conditions where mothers are trapped and fathers abusive. She even sees herself molested in a monkey garden (a modern Eden) among red clowns (bloodthirsty males). She appeals to Aunt Lupe (Guadalupe, after the Mexican Virgin Mother), who tells her to write, to create. In the end, when Esperanza meets three aunts, or sisters (her trinity), she in effect has a spiritual vision, one which she describes in concrete language. One is cat-eyed, another's hands are like marble, a third smells like Kleenex. The girl uses these sights, smells, and touches to envision poetically her future house. As with Huck and Holden, there is something she does not fully understand. What she knows is that through these *comadres* (co-mothers) she will give birth to something very new. Like the two male protagonists, she longs for a respect and compassion absent in her experiences on Mango Street, and these women are her spiritual inspiration.

The ending of *Mango Street* is also very significant in terms of literary continuity. Just prior to the end Esperanza meets the three aunts at the funeral of a sister of her friends Lucy and Rachel; they tell her she cannot forget who she is and that if she leaves she must come back. In the end the girl recognizes that she both belongs and does not belong to Mango street. Then she vows to return to the house because of the "ones who cannot" leave. One reason for this is her writing, which has made her strong. She plans to "put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much." What this means relative to other women's novels is that she reverses a trend. In *Our Nig,* Nig is dissipated in the end. The protagonist of *Yellow Wallpaper* goes crazy before literally crawling over her dominating husband's body. Edna in *The Awakening* swims to her death rather than face a culture that will not recognize her identity. Not so with Esperanza. She is strong (something Mexican women should not be), perfectly aware of the problems with a patriarchal culture, and because of her love for her people, albeit abused and dehumanized, vows to return, and it is the writing which gives her the strength....

There is one other way in which Cisneros seems to look to her predecessors for literary and cultural continuity, and that is the way she as an author comes into the text....

In *Mango Street* Cisneros has created the voice of a child, who is also a poet, a writer. For the most part that voice is consistent, but sometimes not. Once when Esperanza is playing an outside voice puts her friends and herself in perspective:

Who's stupid?
Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza and Nenny.

In this case it is the author who seems to be speaking. And when Lupe is dying, and Esperanza helps lift her head, suddenly we are inside Lupe: "The water was warm and tasted like metal." Here the author's presence is unmistakable. Perhaps Cisneros's most significant intrusion comes when Esperanza says that Mexican men do not "like their women strong"-a comment that belongs more to an adult than a child, and it seems to underpin the whole novel....

So Cisneros, like Twain and Salinger, seems to enter the narrative to help define its ultimate meaning. Unlike the boys' quests, however, this novel is a collection of genres-essays, short stones, poems-put together in one way to show Esperanza's growth, but in another to imitate the part-by-part building of an edifice. Indeed, the house on Mango Street does not just refer to the place Esperanza is trying to leave, but to the novel Itself as "a house" which Esperanza as character and Cisneros as author have built together. Huck may go out to the territory, rejecting civilization, and Holden may tell his story to gain the strength to return, but Esperanza through her writing has in fact redesigned society Itself through a mythical house of her own.

In this regard, Lupe once told Esperanza to "keep writing," it will "keep you free " At that time the girl did not know what she meant, but in the end Esperanza says "she sets me free," so in a sense the house is already built-a monument to her people and her sex Indeed, Esperanza is very different from the other women in the text. She has learned from them and not made their mistakes. So she is not trapped like her mother, Alicia, or Sally, or the others. Like Huck and Holden, she is the example for other Chicana women whom Cisneros would have us take to heart. Indeed, as the witch woman Elenita predicted earlier, Esperanza elects to build a "new house, a house made of heart." And in the tradition of, but distinct from Huck and Holden, that is Just what she has accomplished.

Source: Thomas Matchie, "Literary Continuity in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street,"* in *The Midwest Quarterly,* Vol. XXXVII, No I, Autumn, 1995, pp. 67-79.

Critical Essay #3

In this excerpt, Klein describes the character Esperanza's coming of *age as a woman, a Chicana, and, at least for now, a resident* of *Mango Street.*

At birth, each person begins a search to know the world and others, to answer the age-old question, "Who am I". This search for knowledge, for truth, and for personal identity is written about in autobiographies and in bildungsroman fiction. For years, though, the canon of United States literature has included predominantly the coming-of-age stories of white, heterosexual males. Where are the stories of the others-the women, the African Americans, the Asian Americans, the Hispanics, the gay males and lesbians? What differences and similarities would we find in their bildungsroman? Many writers, silenced before, are now finding the strengths, the voices, and the market for publication to tell their stones

Chicano/a writers, like African Americans, Asian Americans, and others, are being heard; in autobiography and in fiction, they are telling their coming-of-age stories *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1989) [is one] such Chicano/a [work] of fiction. [In this text,] Cisneros show[s] the forces-social and cultural-that shape and define [her] characters [The novel shows] the struggle of the Chicano/a people to find Identities that are true to themselves as individuals and artists but that do not betray their culture and their people.

This is no mean feat, considering that Anglos did not teach them to value their cultural heritage and experiences, that they were shown no Chicano/a role models, that, in fact, they were often discouraged from writing. Cisneros says [in her book, *From a Writer's Notebook]* that as a winter growing up without models of Chicano/a literature, she felt impoverished with nothing of personal merit to say.

As a poor person growing up in a society where the class norm was superimposed on a TV screen, I couldn't understand why our home wasn't all green lawn and white wood .. I rejected what was at hand and emulated the voices of the poets... big, male voices all wrong for me ... it seems crazy, but I had never felt my home, family, and neighborhood unique or worthy of writing about ..

Cisneros, being an only daughter in a family of six sons, was often lonely She read, in part, to escape her loneliness. Cisneros reflects that her aloneness "was good for a would-be writer-it allowed ... time to think. to imagine to read and prepare." Cisneros in "Notes to a Young(er) Writer" *[The Americas Review]* explains that her reading was an important "first step." She says she left chores undone as she was "reading and reading, nurturing myself with books like vitamins" ...

Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* is ... narrated by a child protagonist. Esperanza, the protagonist, tells about her life on Mango Street; we see her family, friends, and community, their daily troubles and concerns. By the end of the story, she has gained understanding about both herself and her community/culture *The House on Mango*

Street is the story of growing awareness which comes in fits and starts, a series of almost epiphanic narrations mirrored in a structure that is neither linear nor traditional, a hybrid of fictive and poetic form, more like an impressionistic painting where the subject isn't clear until the viewer moves back a bit and views the whole. Esperanza tells her story in a series of forty-four, individually titled vignettes. Ellen McCracken *[in Breaking Boundaries]* believes that this bildungsroman, which she prefers to label a "collection" rather than a novel, "roots the individual self in the broader... sociopolitical reality of the Chicano/a community."

For Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street,* the notion of "house"--or a space of her own--is critical to her coming of age as a mature person and artist Ramon Saldivar says [in *Chicano Narrative]* that this novel "emphasizes the crucial roles of racial and material as well as ideological conditions of oppression." At the beginning of the novel, Esperanza explains how her parents talk about moving into a "real" house that "would have running water and pipes that worked." Instead she lives in a run-down flat and is made to feel embarrassed and humiliated because of it One day while she is playing outside, a nun from her school walks by and stops to talk to her.

Where do you live? she asked.
There, I said pointing to the third floor. You live *there?*
There -I had to look where she pointed-the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed in the windows so we wouldn't fall out You live there? The way she said It made me feel like nothing.

Later in the novel, in a similar occurrence, a nun assumes that Esperanza lives in an even worse poverty-stricken area than, in fact, is the case. Julian Olivares says [in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism]* thus the "house and narrator become identified as one, thereby revealing an ideological perspective of poverty and shame." Esperanza desires a space of her own, a real home with warmth and comfort and security, a home she wouldn't be ashamed of. For Esperanza, the house is also a necessity; echoing Virginia Woolf, she needs "A House of My Own" in order to create, a "house quiet as snow... clean as paper before the poem."

Other houses on Mango Street do not live up to Esperanza's desires either, for they are houses that "imprison" women. Many vignettes illustrate this. There is the story of Marin who always has to baby-sit for her aunt; when her aunt returns from work, she may stay out front but not go anywhere else. There is also the story of Rafaela whose husband locks her indoors when he goes off to play dominoes. He wishes to protect his woman, IDS "possession," since Rafaela is "too beautiful to look at." And there is Sally whose father "says to be this beautiful is trouble [H]e remembers his sisters and is sad. Then she can't go out." Sally marries, even before eighth grade, in order to escape the confinement and abuse of her father's house, but in the vignette, "Linoleum Roses," we see her dominated as well in the house of her husband.

She is happy, except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window....
She sits home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission

Esperanza sees, as Olivares notes, that "the woman's place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice." And so, slowly, cumulatively, stroke by stroke, and story by story, Esperanza comes to realize that she must leave Mango Street so that she will not be entrapped by poverty and shame or imprisoned by patriarchy.

Another element of the bildungsroman is the appearance of a mentor who helps guide the protagonist... .

In *The House on Mango Street* there is an ironic twist to the guidance of mentors, for often Esperanza is guided by examples of women she does *not* want to emulate, such as Sally and Rafaela. [There] are several role models who sometimes give her advice. They nurture her writing talent, show her ways to escape the bonds of patriarchy, and remind her of her cultural and communal responsibilities. Minerva is a young woman who, despite being married to an abusive husband, writes poems and lets Esperanza read them. She also reads Esperanza's writing. Aunt Lupe, dying of a wasting illness, urges Esperanza to keep writing and counsels her that this will be her freedom. Alicia, who appears in two stones, is, perhaps, the best role model. While she must keep house for her father, she still studies at the university so she won't be trapped. Alicia also reminds Esperanza that Esperanza is Mango Street and will one day return. McCracken says that Alicia fights "what patriarchy expects of her" and at the same time represents a clear-sighted, non-mystified vision of the barrio.. [S]he embodies both the anti-patriarchal themes and the social obligation to return to one's ethnic community

The story, "Three Sisters," is a kind of subversive fairytale. Esperanza attends the wake of her friends' baby sister and is suddenly confronted by three mysterious old women These women examine Esperanza's hands, tell her to make a wish, and advise, "When you leave, you must remember always to come back. [Y]ou can't forget who you are.. *[C]ome* back for the ones who cannot leave as easily as you." They direct her to remember her responsibilities to her community. In this bildungsroman, Esperanza is reminded consistently that the search for self involves more than mere personal satisfaction. All of these women offer guidance to help Esperanza in her coming of age.

[The protagonist] must endure other rites of passage to reach full personhood and understanding....

Esperanza's rites of passage.. speak through the political realities of Mango Street Her major loss of innocence has to do with gender and with being sexually appropriated by men In the Vignette, "The Family of Little Feet," Esperanza and her friends don high heels and strut confidently down the street. They are pleased at first with their long legs and grown-up demeanors, then frightened as they are leered at, yelled to, threatened, and solicited McCracken says, "Cisneros proscribes a romantic or exotic reading of the dress-up episode, focusing instead on the girls' discovery of the threatening nature of male sexual power".

Perhaps Esperanza's "descent into darkness" occurs in the story "Red Clowns." Unlike the traditional bildungsroman, the knowledge with which she emerges is not that of

regeneration, but of painful knowledge, the knowledge of betrayal and physical violation. In this story, she is waiting for Sally, *who* is off on a romantic liaison. Esperanza, all alone, is grabbed and raped. Afterward, she says, "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 (p]lease don't make me tell it all." In this story, Esperanza is also angry and calls Sally "a liar" because through books and magazines and the talk of women she has been led to believe the myth of romantic love. [In "The Politics of Rape," *(The Americas Review)]* Marla Herrera-Sobek calls this story a "diatribe" that is directed not only at Sally, but at the community of women in a conspiracy of silence in not denouncing the "real" facts of life about sex and Its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and *complicity* in romanticizing and idealizing unrealistic sexual relations.

Esperanza, triply marginalized by race, class, and gender, has lost her innocence. Yet, despite this pain and violation, she manages to tell her story. She has come of age, and she understands that in the future she must serve *both* herself and her community.

I will say goodbye to Mango... Friends and neighbors will say, what happened to that Esperanza? .. They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind for the ones who cannot out.

Source: Dianne Klein, "Coming of Age in Novels by Rudolfo Anaya and Sandra Cisneros," in *English Journal,* Vol 81, No.5, September, 1992, pp. 21-6.

Adaptations

The House on Mango Street was adapted as a sound recording entitled *House on Mango Street; Woman Hollering Creek,* published by Random House in 1992. It is read by Sandra Cisneros.

Topics for Further Study

Characterize the social constraints of the women in Esperanza's neighborhood, and describe how Esperanza both responds to and transcends the social forces in her environment.

Discuss the metaphor of the house in *The House on Mango Street.*

Discuss *The House on Mango Street* in relationship to the history of Mexican Americans in large cities of the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

My Wicked Wicked Ways, published as a book in 1987 by Sandra Cisneros, is an adaptation of her master's thesis from the University of Iowa. This collection of poems expresses various themes of the writer's early career.

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories is Cisneros's 1991 collection of stories characterizing Mexican Americans living in San Antonio, Texas. The book explores the process of socialization and cultural assimilation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans into American society.

Bad Boys is a short collection of poems by Sandra Cisneros published in 1980. Like *The House on Mango Street,* the poems in *Bad Boys* revolve around stones from Hispanic neighborhoods and are characterized by short, vivid phrases that evoke impressionistic images of her characters.

The Rodrigo Poems, another collection of poetry by Sandra Cisneros published in 1985, reflects a more mature voice that characterizes Cisneros's work after *The House on Mango Street.* These poems are inspired by the author's travels in Europe, and evoke her encounters with men, all of whom are anonymously referred to as "Rodrigo."

Baseball in April: And Other Stories by Oary Soto (1990) realistically captures the daily lives of young Hispanics in this collection of eleven short stories.

Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda,* published in 1973, features a Puerto Rican girl living in the barrio of New York City during World War II, where she meets discrimination every day.

1995' s *The Air Down Here. True Tales from a South Bronx Boyhood,* is a collection of reminiscences from Gil C. Alicea and Carmen Desena, who talk of real life for a teen in a Hispanic neighborhood of New York City.

Further Study

Pilar E Rodriguez Aranda, interview in *The Americas Review,* Spring, 1990, pp 64-80.

An interview with Cisneros which focuses on the writing of *The House on Mango Street* as well as on the general trend of Latin as "reinventing themselves" in relation to their Culture

Mana Elena de Valdes, "In Search of Identity in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street,"* in *The Canadian Review* of *American Studies,* Volume 23'1 (Fall), 1992, pp. 55-72.

Emphasizes the importance of Esperanza's "highly lyrical" narrative voice.

Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo, "Growing Up Chicano. Tomas Rivera and Sandra Cisneros," in *Revista Chicano-Riquena,* Volume 13'34, 1985, pp. 109-19.

Considers Cisneros' novel as an example of the growing up story which forms a general theme in Chicano literature.

Ellen McCracken, "Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street:* Community-Oriented Introspection and the Demys tification of Patriarchal Violence," In *Breaking Boundaries: Lana Writing and Critical Readings,* edited by Anuncion Homo-Delgado, Eliana Ortega, Nina M. Scott, Nancy Saporta Steinbach, University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, pp 62-71.

Discusses *The House on Mango Street* as a "mar ginalized text" which contradicts the individualistic values of the male-dominated literal}' canon

Juhan Olivares, "Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street, and the Poetics of Space," in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism' Charting New Frontiers in American Literature,* Arte Publico, 1988, pp 160-69.

Claims that Cisneros "employs her imagery as a poetics of space," but reverses the conventional emphasis on the home as a Site of comfort and the outside world as a source of anxiety

Renato Rosaldo, "Fables of the Fallen Guy," in *Criticism in the Borderlands' Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology,* edited by Hector Calderon and Jose David Sal divar, Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 84-93.

Situates *The House on Mango Street* and Cisneros In the context of earlier narratives of cultural authenticity written by Latino writers featuring male warrior-heroes.

Ramon Saldivar, "The Dialectics of Subjectivity. Gender and Difference in Isabella Rios, Sandra Cisneros, and Cherne Moraga," in *Chicano Narrative. The Dialectics* of *Difference,* University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, pp. 171-99.

Discusses the intersection of race, gender, and class in *The House on Mango Street.*

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Bebe Moore Campbell, "Crossing Borders,'" *New York Times Book Review,* May 26, 1991, p. 6.

Sandra Cisneros, "Interview With Sandra Cisneros,'" in Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla, *Interviews* with *Writers* of *the Post-Colonial World,* University Press Of Mississippi, 1992.

Eduardo F. Elias, "Sandra Cisneros," *Dictionary* of *Literary Biography, Volume* 122 *Chicano Writers, Second Series* edited by Francisco A Loineli and Carl Sooley, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 77-81.

Eduardo F Elias, 'The House on Mango Street," *Reference Guide to American Literature,* 3rd edition, edited by Jim Kamp, Gale Research, 1994, p. 992.

Eduardo F. Elias, "Sandra Cisneros," *Reference Guide to American Literature,* 3rd edition, edited by Jim Kamp, Gale Research, 1994, pp. 200-02.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Novels for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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