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The House on Mango Street

Author Biography: Sandra Cisneros (1954 -)

Sandra Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, in Chicago, Illinois. She is the third of seven children and the only daughter, so she sometimes felt left out in her brothers' company. Her father, a Mexican immigrant, worked as an upholsterer and frequently talked about his sons, but not as often about Sandra. Her mother worked in a local factory and completed most chores around the house so Sandra could focus on her schoolwork because she felt an education was very important to her daughter's future.

Señor Cisneros's family still lived in Mexico City, so the entire family made an annual trip to spend quality time with their extended family. Each time they returned to Chicago, the Cisneroses unpacked their belongings into a new apartment, and the children enrolled in a different school. Consequently, Sandra Cisneros had trouble making friends and feeling like she belonged. She found reading, especially reading fairy tales, an excellent way to escape her lonely childhood, and she was thankful that it was possible to do so, even in a poor family, with the library card her mother helped her obtain.

In 1966, the family finally moved into a house of their own, which helped the children to stay in one school. When she began high school at Josephinum Academy, an all-girls Catholic school near her house, Cisneros found another place where she felt she belonged. Her classmates and one particular teacher acknowledged her writing talent—especially poetry writing—and encouraged her to continue.

During her college years, first at Loyola University in Chicago and then in the Master's Program at the University of Iowa, Cisneros found her unique writing voice. At first, she looked around her classes and observed the faculty, realizing that she was very different because she was a woman from a poor neighborhood with a personal identity that was part American and part Mexican. Eventually she discovered that she could pull experiences from her own life, especially the people and places from the neighborhoods of her childhood, to write poems and stories that were both important and interesting.

At first, Cisneros could not make enough money as a full-time writer to pay her bills, so she took a job as a counselor for high school dropouts at Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago in 1978. During the day, she helped the students deal with their personal and academic troubles while encouraging them to focus on their goals. In the evenings, Cisneros gave public readings of her writing and worked on a small chapbook of her poetry, entitled *Bad Boys*, which was published in 1980 as a limited run. Also that year, she left the high school to take a job as a recruiter at her alma mater, Loyola University, in an effort to encourage more Latino students to attend college. While in both school environments, she continued to meet interesting people and collect their stories, which served as more inspiration for the writing she did in her free time.

In 1982, Cisneros got her first big break: the National Endowment for the Arts awarded her a grant, which allowed her to quit her job and focus only on her writing for a while. She finally had time to put all her short writing pieces together, and the concept for her most famous publication emerged. To get some distance from her home and the people she was writing about, she left the United States to travel around Europe while she revised her little stories, called *vignettes*. During this time, she also wrote more poems and built friendships with people overseas. These friendships reminded her of how similar all people are, despite

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their many differences. She returned to the United States in 1984 for the publication of *The House on Mango Street*, which received so much critical praise for its new style and fresh voice that it won the Before Columbus American Book Award.

Shortly thereafter, Cisneros moved to San Antonio to work with the Guadalupe Arts Center. She immediately found a community in San Antonio that made her feel welcome and comfortable in a way she never felt in Chicago. San Antonio has been her home since. After *The House on Mango Street* was published, she was also better able to earn money and secure awards and grants that allowed her to focus on her writing.

In 1987, she published a book of poems, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, which further cemented her reputation as a gifted writer and may have been the catalyst for Random House to offer her \$100,000 for another book of fiction—the largest advance ever offered a Latino writer at that time. Cisneros used the advance to write and revise a collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, which was published in 1991. Her second book of poetry, *Loose Woman* was published in 1994, and an epic novel entitled *Carmelo* was published in 2002.

When Cisneros was a child, there were no Mexican writers that served as role models to her. As a young Mexican-American girl, most people expected Sandra to grow up strong, get married, have children, and take care of the home. She has never gotten married or had children because she says she needs the quiet of her home to write, and her books and poems are like her children. Instead Cisneros made a place in the world for herself, where a young Latina can be creative, thoughtful, and intelligent while also being happy and successful. Although she did not have suitable role models for her writing, as a best-selling author and possibly the most famous Mexican woman writer, Cisneros has become a role model for young writers, especially women, who are inspired by her dedication and talent. She has also been able to use her writing as a means of educating non-Spanish speakers about the Latino experience in America, thereby increasing our understanding of the basic human themes of identity, belonging, and home.

Comprehension Check: Author Biography

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

1. What is one of the problems Sandra Cisneros faced in her youth? How did she overcome it?
2. Do you find any similarities between your life and Sandra Cisneros's? If so, what are they? If not, what is one part of your life that is completely different from Cisneros's?
3. In one or two paragraphs, write an even shorter summary of Cisneros's life, from her birth to the present day, including as many of the important events of her life as you can.
4. What is one life lesson you can learn from Sandra Cisneros's life? Where do you see that lesson exemplified in her life?
5. What do you think Sandra Cisneros is like, based on the information offered in the article? Give three traits and evidence from the article to support your opinions.

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Historical Context: The Mexican Population in Chicago

According to the 2010 census, two-thirds of the United States' Latino population lives in California, Texas, or Arizona. However, the fourth most populous state for Latinos, especially Mexicans, is Illinois. In 1850, the Mexican population of Chicago consisted of a mere 50 people. By 1920, the census reported 1,200 Mexicans living in Chicago, and there were over one million by the year 2000. Today, many Mexican-Americans living in Chicago can trace their family's history in the city as far back as the turn of the previous century.

The period between 1900 and 1925 was full of change for both Mexico and the United States. Mexico was experiencing a time of political unrest and war, so men looking for better wages crossed the American border. In addition, many people found it unsafe to stay in Mexico, so entire families fled the country for the political or religious safety and the freedoms the United States offered.

At this time, Chicago's economy was heavily reliant on the railroad, steel, sugar beet, and meatpacking industries, but more workers were needed, sometimes to replace employees on strike or men fighting overseas during World War I. Business leaders sent representatives to the Southwest to hire newly arrived Mexican immigrants and transport them north. The recruiters, called *enganchistas*, paid for the new workers' railroad fees and meals on the trip to Chicago, with the understanding that the Mexicans' first paychecks would be docked a percentage until the money was compensated.

They had better-paying jobs in the United States, but Mexicans still struggled. Many worked ten or more hours per shift, and their meals consisted of small portions of bread or watered-down stew, if they ate anything at all. Mexican immigrants had difficulty finding reasonably priced housing because many apartment complexes were owned by Europeans who resented immigrants. Therefore, landlords unfairly raised rent prices for Mexicans, which meant many people lived in the same apartment to be able to afford a roof over their heads. With more people in such small spaces, good health and sanitation was difficult to maintain.

By the early 1920s, American soldiers had returned from war and wanted Mexicans to vacate their jobs and their communities. In Chicago, neighborhoods called *colonias*, or enclaves, were informally established to help keep Mexicans together. Some of those areas included Calumet, on the near West Side of Chicago; the Back of the Yards area, near the stockyards; and Pilsen, on the lower West Side. These enclaves gave rise to tortilla factories, restaurants, markets, and Spanish-language newspapers like *El Ideal*. The 1930 census reports 20,000 Mexicans, both immigrants and American citizens, living in Chicago—an increase of six hundred percent in just ten years.

When the Great Depression hit the United States, Mexicans were seen as expendable and undesirable, so a nationwide campaign of repatriation began. Mexicans were rounded up and sent back to Mexico, even those who were born in the United States and were American citizens. Those who remained in the country had an even harder time getting jobs and food for their families, and some were hurt or killed because of racial violence. At the end of the campaign, about one-third of the Mexican population in the United States had been forced out. In Chicago, the loss was not as severe, in part because of the involvement of social workers and the work of settlement houses' staff, who had already been offering assistance to immigrants for decades.

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By the late 1930s, Mexicans in Chicago began to take action to protect themselves and each other from the difficulties around them. Mutual aid societies were established in the enclaves, which required members to put a portion of their earnings into a community collection box each month. When a member needed money for a serious problem, like unemployment, illness, or death, they were given a portion of the money in the community savings to alleviate the issue. In addition, Mexicans, especially steel workers, joined labor unions like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to win better wages and working conditions and to fight racism they observed in the workplace.

In 1940, there were 35,000 Mexicans living in or around Chicago, but that was about to change. When Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941, Mexicans living in the United States joined the military to fight with the Allied forces in World War II. Some illegal immigrants were able to earn their citizenship this way, including Sandra Cisneros's father. However, there were once again thousands of jobs needing to be filled, so the United States government established the *Bracero* Program (*brazo* means arm in Spanish) to invite guest workers from Mexico into the United States. These men were each on a six-month employment contract to work in agriculture in the Southwest and the railroad industry in Chicago and other major cities. The program ran until 1964.

In the meantime, the Mexican-American community in Chicago continued to expand. Some *braceros* did not return to Mexico when their contracts were up, and they illegally stayed in the country with friends or relatives, taking jobs where they could. *Colonias* spread to larger areas, and an area near Pilsen called Little Village, or *La Villita*, became the center of Mexican culture in Chicago and remains so today. Mexican families also moved out of the city to the suburbs, including Joliet and Aurora, to find more space and larger homes. From the 1950s to the 1970s, organizations like the Mexican Patriotic Committee, the Chicago Area Project, and a branch of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) formed to meet the community, educational, and civil rights needs of the 250,000 Mexican citizens living in the Chicago area in 1970, a number that had increased five hundred percent since 1950.

In the 1970s, the Chicano movement encouraged strength and pride in the Mexican culture in Chicago. Muralists such as Mario Castillo painted reminders of their heritage—from Aztec and Mayan symbols to entertainers, political leaders, and personal family members—as a way to pay homage to their roots. Mexican-Americans also worked in community organizations like the Spanish Coalition for Jobs and the Latino Institute to get the housing, medical coverage, and education they needed for their families. Through these organizations, they were also able to fight unfair employment practices and racial discrimination in the workplace.

Today, Chicago remains a city where the Mexican culture is showcased and Mexican-Americans feel more empowered. Community service and activist groups work to educate Mexican-Americans on the resources and issues that pertain to them, while smaller pride organizations stage citywide celebrations, like the Mexican Independence Day Parade down 26th Street every September. Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, opened in 1987, has become a major institute for Mexican art and is visited by over 200,000 people annually. Mexican-Americans have earned top offices in local, state, and federal government as representatives of Chicago, and the state of Illinois, and they serve the more than one million Mexican-Americans living in the metropolitan area as of 2010. It is clear that without Mexicans' contributions to the city's industries, community, and culture for over a century, Chicago would not be what it is today.

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Comprehension Check: *The Mexican Population in Chicago*

1. Create a graph showing the growth of the Mexican population in the Greater Chicago Area from 1850 to 2010, according to census data.

2. What are three reasons that Mexicans moved to the United States between 1900 and 1950? _____

3. Describe several ways that the social workers, settlement houses, or activism organizations helped Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans in Chicago.

4. Why is it logical that two-thirds of the Mexican-American population in the United States lives in Texas, California, and Arizona?

5. Develop three research questions you could use to discover more about the Mexican-American experience in Chicago or the United States.

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Standards Focus: Literary Style—Novellas and Vignettes

The House on Mango Street is a novella, which is shorter than a novel. When compared to short stories, novellas are longer, with more conflicts and characters to develop. One definition requires a novella to be between 17,500 words and 40,000 words. Other novellas you might have heard of include *Of Mice and Men*, *Animal Farm*, and *A Christmas Carol*.

Instead of chapters, *House on Mango Street* includes vignettes (vin-YETS), brief descriptive writing pieces. In her vignettes, Sandra Cisneros describes the narrator, Esperanza, and her dreams, her family members and neighbors, and the neighborhood around Esperanza's home. Each vignette is like a photograph, full of sensory details to help readers feel and understand the message the author is trying to convey. The vignettes seem disconnected at first, but careful readers will notice a plot emerge as Esperanza relates her life and the lives of those around her.

In describing her concept of the book, Cisneros thought the reader “would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace.”

1. What benefits or challenges do you see to reading a novella written in vignettes? Explain your answer on a separate piece of paper, using the facts from above.

In the introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros wrote about the writer she was before publishing it. (Note: Cisneros is talking about herself in the third person here.)

She wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children's nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico. It's true, she wants writers she admires to respect her work, but she also wants people who don't usually read books to enjoy these stories, too. She doesn't want to write a book that a reader doesn't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding.

She thinks stories are about beauty. Beauty that is there to be admired by anyone, like a herd of clouds grazing overhead. She thinks people who are busy working for a living deserve beautiful little stories, because they don't have much time and are often tired. She has in mind a book that can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader who doesn't know what came before or comes after.

2. Do you know people who don't read in their free time? Based on Sandra Cisneros's opinions, what are a few reasons they might not read? Why does Cisneros think people should read her stories? Write your answers on your paper.

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Cisneros continues to write about the style she adopted for *House on Mango Street*:

She experiments, creating text that is as succinct and flexible as poetry, snapping sentences into fragments so that the reader pauses, making each sentence serve her and not the other way around, abandoning quotation marks to streamline the typography and make the page as simple and readable as possible. So that the sentences are pliant as branches and can be read in more ways than one.

3. With poetic writing, fragments and longer sentences, no quotation marks, do you think *The House on Mango Street* will be easy for you to read? Explain your reasoning with personal experience or the details from above. Write your answers on your paper.

In an interview she did with her publisher, Cisneros said she felt that *The House on Mango Street* has a particular draw for teenagers because Esperanza has some of the same questions they do.

I think that it speaks to young people's isolation, loneliness, and longing. . . . You basically have to invent [your list of possibilities] as you go, and you don't know who you're going to become yet. So you're looking around for models, as Esperanza is. She's looking at other women around her, saying, "I don't wanna go that way. I'm not going that way. But where do I go? Where do I fit? And how do I make myself into the person I want to be if I don't see that person I want to be?" I think that that's true for young people of any culture in their teens, when one day they still feel like a kid and the next day, you know, you've got the responsibilities of the adult.

4. Do you think young people are basically isolated and lonely? Are young people searching for role models? Do you agree that teens can be a kid one day and an adult the next? Respond to Cisneros's comments. Do you think a story like this is one you will like to read? Write your answers on your paper.

Cisneros characterizes her novella as a coming-of-age story, or a *bildungsroman*. In this type of book, a young main character has to learn about his or her world through observation and questioning, and this new education forces the character to make some surprising or uncomfortable realizations in order to become an adult. You may have read another *bildungsroman*, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, or *Ender's Game*. Can you think of any more?

5. Predict what kind of adult knowledge Esperanza may learn in *The House on Mango Street* that may cause her to mature and feel like an adult. Write your answers on your paper.

Interview Responses from "The House on Mango Street" – *The Story* on YouTube.com, KnopfGroup Channel <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Pyf89VsNmg>

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Pre-Reading Activity: Thematic Literary Elements

Directions: For the following statements and questions, compose several sentences or a paragraph giving your reaction or answer to each question. Do your writing on a separate sheet of paper.

1. List five events that indicate that a child is growing into an adult. Explain how each of these experiences signifies that someone has become more adult.
 - a. Consider: How much do a person's physical qualities, personal abilities and accomplishments, and emotional readiness make that person an adult?
 - b. Which should be more important in determining maturity: a person's physical appearance, his/her intellectual abilities, or his/her emotional strength? Explain your answer.

2. Discuss how the statement, "Once you leave, you can never go home again," applies to children becoming adults.
 - a. How important do you think it is to have a home? Is it important that it remain the same while you're away? For example, would you be upset if your home changed while you were away for the weekend? for summer camp? for college?
 - b. Think about a time when you have left someplace you frequented as a child, and it seemed different when you returned. For example, you might think about a former home, your kindergarten classroom, a playground you used to visit, or the pool where you learned to swim. Has the place changed much, or have you? How?

3. Discuss how dreams (having a goal or vision) motivate human behavior.
 - a. Provide a personal, literary, or historical example of a person with dreams. Discuss how this person's actions led to attaining his/her dream or prevented him/her from turning the dream into reality.
 - b. Explain why you think humans tend to dream about a different life. Is dreaming necessary for growth and motivation? Why or why not?

4. Consider the cultural importance of the spiritual.
 - a. Why do you think people consider belief in a god or gods to be important hallmarks of a culture?
 - b. Select a particular historical or modern-day culture and explain how its people display or do not display belief in a higher existence. How do these beliefs affect the daily lives of the people of this culture?

5. *The House on Mango Street* repeatedly examines the role of women in their own lives, their parents' lives, their husbands' lives, their children's lives, and the world outside their homes.
 - a. Provide a modern-day example of a woman who holds many important roles in her life. How does she meet all of the expectations that come with those roles? If she does not balance the roles well, what prevents her from doing so?
 - b. Anticipate how you think the concept of women's roles will be developed in *The House on Mango Street*.

After you have answered Questions 1-5, you will be divided into five small groups. As a group, discuss and summarize your group's responses.

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The House on Mango Street **Anticipation/Reaction Activity**

Directions—Before reading the novel: In the “Before Reading” column, write “yes” if you agree with the statement, “no” if you disagree with the statement, and “?” if you don’t have a strong opinion or are not sure about the statement.

Yes = I agree

No = I disagree

? = I don’t know

Before Reading	Statement	After Reading
	1. The names people are given determine what type of people they will become.	
	2. Little girls should be able to wear anything, even if it makes them look like women.	
	3. Getting to know the neighbors is an excellent way to feel comfortable in a new home.	
	4. People who are born smart will have an easy time being successful.	
	5. Beautiful women use their looks as power to control others.	
	6. Where we live now has nothing to do with our lives in the future.	
	7. Dreams are as important to human survival as education, love, and health.	
	8. When trying to build a life, people need role models more than they need motivation.	

After completing the “Before Reading” column, get into small groups and tally the number of “yes,” “no,” and “?” responses for each question. Each group member should keep track of the tally.

Group Members: _____

Statement #	Yes	No	I Don’t Know
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			

Once you have collected your data, discuss those issues about which your group was divided. Make your case for your opinions, and pay attention to your classmates’ arguments. Once you have discussed all of the issues, answer the Pre-Reading Individual Reflection questions on the next page on your own.

Your teacher will collect and keep your chart and responses to use after you have finished reading the novel, when you will complete the Post-Reading Individual Reflection.

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The House on Mango Street **Anticipation/Reaction Reflection**

Pre-Reading Individual Reflection

Directions: Use the information and discussion from the “Before Reading” responses to answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper. Be sure to use complete sentences.

1. Which statements triggered the most thought-provoking or interesting discussion?
2. Summarize the discussion/debate.
3. For any of the statements that you discussed, what were some of the strongest or most memorable points made by your group members?
4. What was your reaction when a group member disagreed with the way you feel about an issue?
5. Was any argument strong enough to make you change your mind or want to change any of your initial responses? Why or why not? What made the argument effective?

Post-Reading Individual Reflection

Directions: After reading the novel, revisit your Anticipation/Reaction Activity and your answers to the discussion questions. Now that you have read the novel, complete the “After Reading” column on page 15 and answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper, comparing your responses. Answer each question using complete sentences.

1. How many of your responses have changed since reading the novel?
2. Which statements do you see differently after reading the novel?
3. Describe an important part of the novel that affected you or made you think differently after reading.
4. In small groups, talk to some of your classmates about their responses. How are their responses different after reading the novel?
5. Overall, are the feelings of your other group members the same or different from yours? Do any of their responses surprise you? Which ones? How?
6. Why do you think there might be so many different opinions and viewpoints? What do you feel has contributed to the way you and your other classmates responded to each statement?

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The House on Mango Street

Part One

Literature Focus: Sequence

The way *The House on Mango Street* was written can be challenging to readers because the events are not told in sequential order. When a story is told in sequential order, the first event is explained first, the second event is explained next, and so on, until the last event is told at the end of the story.

Esperanza does explain the events in the story in sequential order most of the time, but sometimes she skips to the past, which is called a *flashback*. In addition, some vignettes do not describe any events, but they do share Esperanza's feelings or her dreams for the future, which is a form of character development. It is important to pay attention to these shifts in time and tone in order to understand the text and its purpose.

Directions: *Paraphrase the statements below to put them in sequential order on the timeline. If a phrase does not seem like an event in Esperanza's life, but rather a point of character development, draw a star next to the statement and leave it off the timeline.*

- Esperanza loves the bread-like smell of her mother's hair.
- Esperanza and Nenny notice a house that reminds them of Mexico.
- Esperanza spends time with her little sister while her brothers play separately.
- Esperanza's great-grandmother was forced to get married.
- Esperanza meets Rachel and Lucy and buys a bike with them.
- Esperanza, Rachel, and Lucy spend the day riding their bike together.
- Rachel and Lucy laugh in the same way.
- Esperanza dreams of a bigger house with a large yard and three washrooms.
- Cathy becomes Esperanza's friend.
- Esperanza's name makes her feel uncomfortable, and she wants to change it.
- Esperanza's family moves to the house on Mango Street.
- Esperanza does not want to grow up like her great-grandmother.
- Cathy walks away and is not Esperanza's friend anymore.

