

The House on Mango Street  
By: Sandra Cisneros  
Freshmen Summer Reading: Honors

*The House on Mango Street*, an episodic novel, is the story of a young Mexican-American girl growing up in the poor neighborhoods of Chicago. Cisneros writes in a poetic style with short, easy-to-read chapters that are rich in metaphors and interesting characters. Because of its style, interesting characters, and very relevant themes of sexism, cultural identity, racism, and the impact of poverty on children, this novel is studied across many levels.

Sandra Cisneros, like her protagonist, is a Hispanic who grew up in the poor neighborhoods of Chicago. In addition to the novel *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros has published a collection of short stories and several books of poetry.

**\*Please complete the entire study guide on a separate sheet of paper.**

**LITERARY TERMS and DEFINITIONS:**

**Please familiarize yourself with these important terms and definitions before you begin reading the novel.**

1. *Episodic Novel* – a novel made up of a succession of loosely connected incidents, rather than through an integrated, chronological plot.
2. *Limited Omniscient* – narration in which the author explains the thoughts of only one character.
3. *Loss of Innocence* – a story in which an innocent child or young adult lives a blissful and happy life, untouched by evil or hardship. This innocence is shattered, however, by what the character observes or experiences about the world, which changes him or her.
4. *Metaphor* – a comparison of two things that are basically dissimilar in which one is described in terms of the other.
5. *Objective View* – third person narration in which the author is recording action from a neutral point of view.
6. *Omniscient Narrator* – third-person narration that allows the author to relate the thoughts and feelings of any of the characters in an all-knowing manner.
7. *Protagonist* – the central or main character in a story around whom the plot centers.
8. *Rite of Passage* – a physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional test which a young person must overcome in order to be accepted and perceived as an adult by the rest of his or her society.
9. *Stereotyping* – the act of putting people into groups based on race, religion, nationality, physical appearance, social class, or some other easily identifiable characteristic.
10. *Style* – the way an author chooses and uses words, phrases, and sentences to tell the story.
11. *Superstition* – any belief or attitude based on fear or ignorance that is inconsistent with the known laws of science.
12. *Symbol* – an object, person, or place that has a meaning in itself and that also stands for something larger than itself, usually an idea or concept; some concrete thing which represents an abstraction.
13. *Theme* – the central or dominant idea behind the story; the most important aspect that emerges from how the book treats its subject.

**VOCABULARY:**

**Directions:** After you have located the vocabulary word in the book, use a dictionary to define the word by the context as it is used in the sentence. It might be helpful to use [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com).

1. Rosettes
2. Inherited
3. Cumulus
4. Frijoles
5. Tamales
6. Salamander
7. Canteen
8. Anemic
9. Chanclas
10. Merengue
11. Naphtha

12. Hibiscus
13. Comadres
14. Hollyhocks
15. Mamasita
16. Ferocious
17. Sire
18. Babushka
19. Sire
20. Brazer
21. Abuelito
22. Esta Muerto
23. Cumbias
24. Los Espiritues
25. Marimbas
26. Nimbus

**QUESTIONS:**

**Directions:** Answer each question in complete sentences.

**The House on Mango Street:**

1. Why is the house on Mango Street an improvement over the narrator's other homes? In what ways does it fall short of her "dream" house?
2. How large is the narrator's family? What is their religion? What do you think the following quotation says about the narrator's feelings about her home?  
"I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to."
3. What do you think is the significance of the "four little elms the city planted by the curb"?

**Hairs:**

4. What character traits are suggested for each of the following family members by the narrator's description of each one's hair?
  - a. Papa
  - b. Carlos
  - c. Nenny
  - d. Kiki
5. What does the following quotation suggest about the quality of the narrator's home?  
"The snoring, the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread."

**Boys & Girls:**

6. In what way can it be said the narrator has "mixed" feelings about her sister Nenny?
7. This novel is written in poetic style. What do you think is the meaning of the following metaphor?  
"Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor."

**My Name:**

8. Why is it bad luck for a woman to be born in the year of the horse?
9. Why does Esperanza say that she has her grandmother's name but doesn't "want to inherit her place by the window"?
10. What does Esperanza dislike about her name? Why do you suppose she wants to be called Zeze the X?

**Cathy Queen of Cats:**

11. This chapter is written partly with Esperanza as the narrator and partly with Cathy narrating. What is the first line narrated by Cathy? What is the last? Why do you think the author decides to write part of this chapter from Cathy's point of view?
12. What does Cathy say to hurt Esperanza? How are Cathy's parents and Esperanza's parents alike?

### **Our Good Day:**

13. Briefly describe Lucy and Rachel. Why do you think Esperanza likes them?
14. Why do you think Esperanza decides to buy the bicycle with Lucy and Rachel, knowing she will make Cathy "mad forever"? What does Esperanza learn about herself and the kinds of friends she wants to have?

### **Laughter:**

15. In what ways is Esperanza's sister, Nenny, similar to Esperanza?
16. This is an episodic novel written in small vignettes or literary sketches. What observation about family do you think Cisneros is making in this chapter?

### **Gil's Furniture Bought and Sold:**

17. What are the "gold glasses floating in the dark"?
18. In what ways is Esperanza both disappointed in the music box Nenny finds and delighted with it? To what extent may the box be considered a metaphor for Esperanza's neighborhood?
19. Contrast Nenny's behavior toward the man who owns the junk shop with Esperanza's. Why doesn't Esperanza talk to the old man?

### **Meme Ortiz:**

20. Support or refute the following statement: The huge tree in Meme's backyard is a metaphor describing how the outside world views Esperanza's neighborhood. What can the red balls represent?
21. What does the following passage from the story suggest about Meme's character?  
"This is the tree we chose for the First Annual Tarzan Jumping Contest. Meme won. And broke both arms."

### **Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin:**

22. Support or refute the following statement: Louie's cousin might have gotten away with stealing the yellow Cadillac if he had not gone back to Mango Street to give his family a ride in the car.
23. Why do you think Esperanza describes the incident with Louie's cousin as being "important"?

### **Marin:**

24. Many critics believe this novel expresses many feminist views. From the perspective of a feminist, what is wrong with Marin's "dream" described in the following passage?  
"...she's going to get a real job downtown because that's where the best jobs are, sine you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you..."
25. What does the following passage from the novel suggest about Marin's fate? What are her chances of finding someone to rescue her from life of Mango Street?  
"Marin, under streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life."

### **Those Who Didn't:**

26. Support or refute the following statement: Cisneros believes people of all races feel fear and prejudice and fit into the category of "Those Who Don't."

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

27. Why do the neighbors "give up" on the Vargas children? What can you infer about Angel Vargas' fate by his name?

### **Alicia Who Sees Mice:**

28. Support or refute the following statement: The description of the mice is a metaphor for a woman's life on Mango Street.

### **Darius & the Clouds:**

29. Sometimes Cisneros rhymes the phrases in her sentence like stanzas in a poem might rhyme. Find a sentence in this chapter which illustrates these rhyming patterns. Do you notice any rhythmic pattern or personification used to create images in this chapter?
30. Support or refute the following statement: Esperanza believes God is looking down at the people on Mango Street and supports their hopes and dreams for the future.

**And Some More:**

31. What evidence is there in this chapter that Rachel and Lucy are learning to be prejudiced against people with dark skin?
32. Cisneros is well known for her unusual style of writing. Besides the poetic structure of the sentences, what is usual about her style of writing in this chapter? Why are the conversations between the girls sometimes difficult to understand?

**The Family of Little Feet:**

33. Support or refute this statement: Feet are a symbol for growing up in this chapter.

**A Rice Sandwich:**

34. What do you think Esperanza learns about life when she finally gets to eat her rice sandwich in the canteen?

**Chanclas:**

35. If feet are a symbol of growing up, what do the brown-and-white school shoes mean in this chapter?
36. What is the significance of Esperanza's first adult dance occurring at a baptism?

**Hips:**

37. How old do you think Esperanza is at this point in the story? What evidence is there that she wants to look more like a woman?

**The First Job:**

38. The first job is Esperanza's first opportunity to experience the world away from Mango Street. What does her first job teach her about men and women in general?

**Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark:**

39. What do Mexican people do to honor their dead?
40. Why does Esperanza's papa "wake up tired in the dark"? How does Esperanza feel about her father?

**Born Bad:**

41. What is the impact of Aunt Lupe's illness on her husband and children?
42. Why do you think Aunt Lupe says to Esperanza, "You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free."?

**Elenita, Cards, Palm, Water:**

43. List the superstitions or cures attributed to Elenita's power.

**Geraldo No Last Name:**

44. Support or refute the following statement with incidents from this chapter: Geraldo is the stereotype of an illegal Mexican whose life is of no importance.

**Edna's Ruthie:**

45. What evidence is there in this chapter that Ruthie may be mentally handicapped?

**The Earl of Tennessee:**

46. Why is a white Southerner like Earl living on Mango Street?

**Sire:**

47. What is the following passage saying about Lois' maturity level compared to Esperanza's?  
"...She was barefoot, and I saw her barefoot baby toenails all painted pale pink...her bones are long like ladies' bones...But she doesn't know how to tie her shoes. I do."

**Four Skinny Trees:**

48. What do the four trees teach Esperanza?

**No Speak English:**

49. Why is Mamacita upset when the baby starts speaking English? What is Cisneros saying about Mexican children in this chapter?

**Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut and Papaya Juice on Tuesdays:**

50. What does Esperanza learn from Rafaela about the life of a young married woman on Mango Street?

**Sally:**

51. Why does Sally's father prevent her from leaving their home after school?
52. Assume Sally's dreams in this chapter are really Esperanza's dreams. What does Esperanza want more than anything else?

**Minerva Writes Poems:**

53. What does Esperanza mean at the end of the chapter when she says, "I don't know which way she'll go. There is nothing I can do."?

**Bums in the Attic:**

54. Why is Esperanza happy to tell her guest that she has "bums" in the attic? What is she saying about her life on Mango Street?

**Beautiful and Cruel:**

55. Many critics consider *The House on Mango Street* a feminist novel. How does the following passage support this idea?

"I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate."

**A Smart Cookie:**

55. Why does Esperanza's mother quit school? What advice does she give her daughter?

**What Sally Said:**

56. Why does Sally go home with her abusive father? Given what you have learned about life on Mango Street, do you think he is justified in worrying about Sally's virtue?

**The Monkey Garden:**

57. Support or refute the following statement with incidents from the chapter: The monkey garden is a metaphor for Esperanza's childhood.

58. Why do you think Esperanza feels "ashamed" when she tries to stop the boys from kissing Sally? What makes her feel so terrible she wants to be dead?

**Red Clowns:**

59. A clown is defined as a person who constantly plays the fool, a trickster, and buffoon. Using this definition what do you think the red clowns might represent in this story?

**Linoleum Roses:**

60. What is the significance of the title of this chapter? What do the linoleum roses represent?

**The Three Sisters:**

61. What are the signs or superstitions that signal the death of the baby?

62. Why does the sister with the marble hands tell Esperanza that she must "remember to come back for the others"?

**Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps:**

63. How much time has passed since the beginning of the book? How are Guadalajara and Mango Street alike?

**A House of My Own:**

64. Why do you think Esperanza describes her house as "clean as paper before the poem"?

**Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes:**

65. Why does she describe herself as a girl who "didn't want to belong"? This is a coming-of-age novel. What has Esperanza learned about herself in the past year? How has she changed her attitude toward Mango Street?

66. Why do you think the following passage from the first chapter is repeated in the last chapter?

"We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler."