

Using
*Bloom's Taxonomy to
Explore Literature*

Levels of Understanding



The House on Mango Street

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Prestwick House

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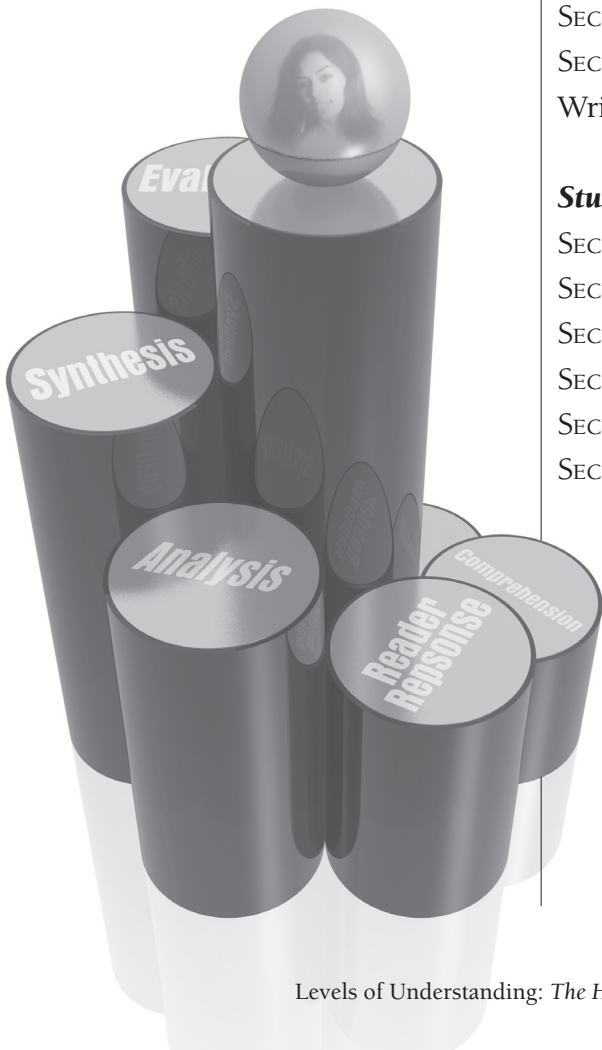
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Introduction to Levels of Understanding

FOR MANY STUDENTS, studying literature is like being lost in an alien universe, filled with hidden symbols, structures, and meanings that only a scholar can uncover. Without a teacher's direction, students lack the skills and confidence to evaluate a work of literature on their own, and instead, will frequently turn to resources such as the Internet for guidance. As a result, they assume another writer's views instead of developing their own.

Levels of Understanding breaks down complex questions students will encounter into smaller parts, showing the steps a critical reader should take in order to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Each section of the guide contains five types of questions representative of Bloom's learning domains—starting with the most basic and foundational skill, knowledge and comprehension, and gradually building to the highest skill, evaluation. All the way, reluctant students are provided with the scaffolding they need to advance from one level of understanding to the next.

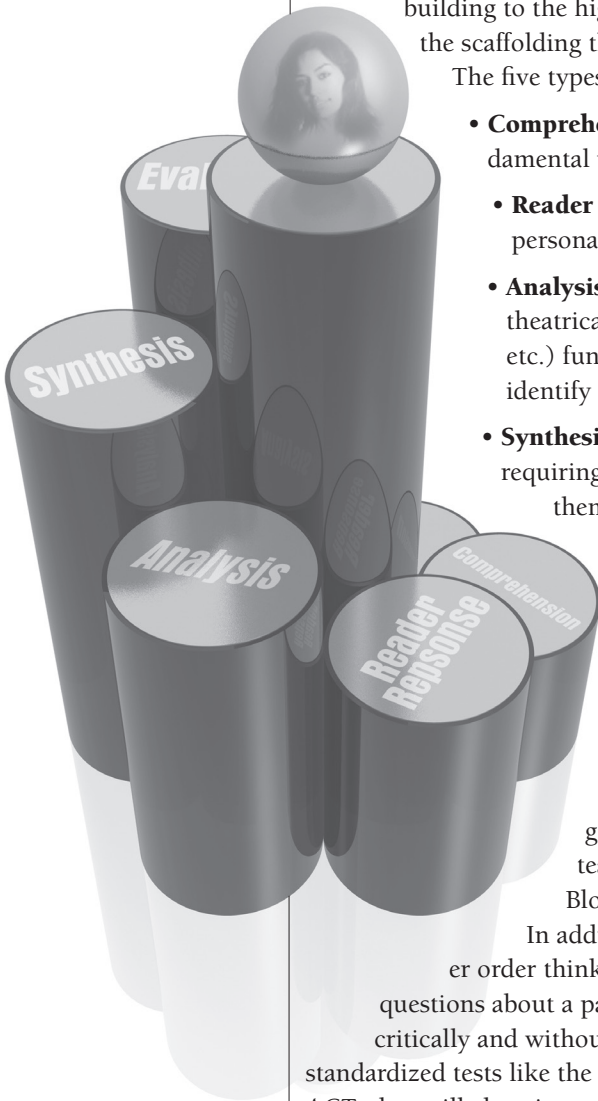
The five types of questions, again, representative of Bloom's domains, are as follows:

- **Comprehension**—will ask the most basic questions to ascertain the students' fundamental understanding of the text: plot facts, character identification, etc.
- **Reader Response**—will ask the students to “respond” to the text by relating it to personal experience or by presenting an opinion on a character or event.
- **Analysis**—will require students to study how various techniques and literary or theatrical devices (diction, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, asides, soliloquies etc.) function in the text. Analysis questions do not ask the student to merely identify or define a literary, theatrical, or rhetorical device.
- **Synthesis**—will bridge the gap between the analysis and evaluation questions, requiring students to look at other scenes in the text and draw conclusions about themes, motifs, or a writer's style. Often, a synthesis question will require the student to draw on prior knowledge—what has been learned in class or through research—and/or information from sources other than the literary title being studied in order to arrive at a satisfactory answer.
- **Evaluation**—will ask the student to make a qualitative judgment on the text and determine whether a particular aspect of it is effective or ineffective.

Other books may list Bloom's taxonomy, define the terms, and offer a general example or two. *Levels of Understanding*, however, provides the teacher with the title-specific questions to allow you to effectively bring Bloom into your classroom.

In addition, unlike other available products that claim to address Bloom's “higher order thinking skills,” *Levels of Understanding* does not teach students how to answer questions about a particular text, but instead helps them develop skills to evaluate literature critically and without guidance. These are skills that will not only help students prepare for standardized tests like the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams, the SATs, and the ACTs, but will also give students the self-assurance to develop and articulate a personal view—a skill that will be highly advantageous to them in college.

This product, however, is not geared toward upper-level students only, but is a versatile guide that can be used for students of all ability levels—remedial through honors. The teacher may customize the product to fit the class's objectives and goals, determining which questions the students will answer. Additionally, the guide is entirely reproducible, and each major division begins on a new page, so you may use *Levels of Understanding* for the whole work of literature or only a specific section. 🍀



How to Use this Unit

EACH LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING: USING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY TO EXPLORE LITERATURE unit is intended to be a deep and rich component of your literature program, whether your goal is to prepare your students for a large-scale assessment like the AP Literature exam or to challenge your students to read carefully and to think deeply about what they have read.

The questions in this guide are designed to be flexible and meet your needs. They can be used as

- homework questions when students read the text independently.
- in-class reading check questions and “bell-ringer” journal entries.
- class discussion questions and prompts.
- focus questions for pre-writing and essay planning.
- review and study questions for assessment.

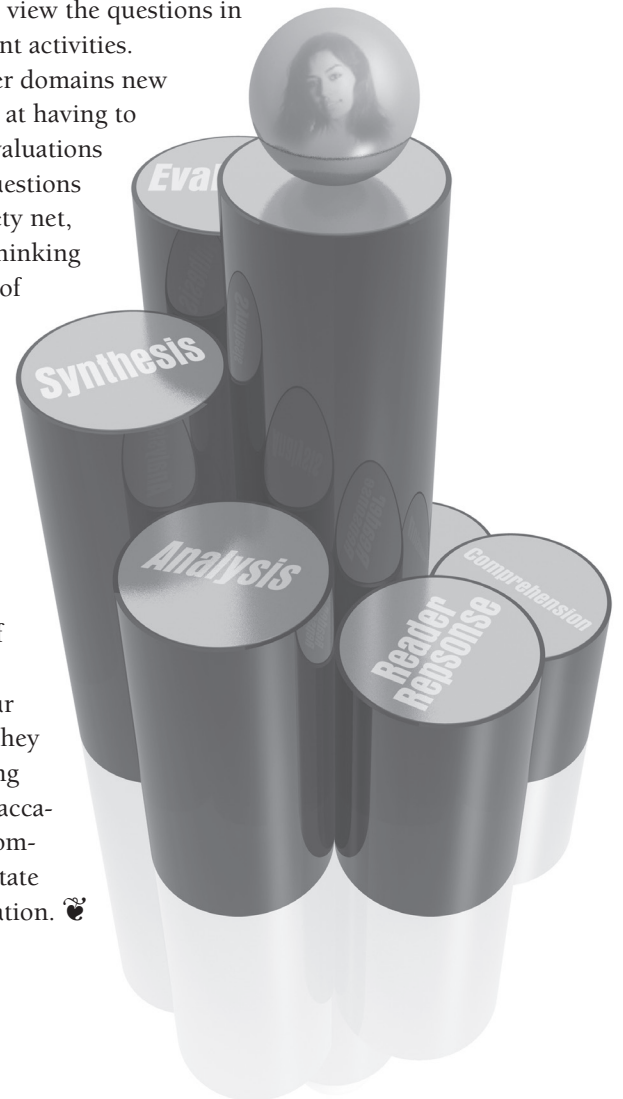
While the Teacher's Guide contains an answer key, you will find that the higher-order questions (especially synthesis and evaluation) have model answers that represent more than one possible response. It would be inappropriate to penalize a student whose well-reasoned and supportable answer did not match the “correct” answer in the guide.

For this reason, we strongly recommend that you view the questions in this guide as learning activities and not as assessment activities.

Many of your students are likely to find the higher domains new and perhaps intimidating. Others might be alarmed at having to support their reader-response reactions and their evaluations with an accurate comprehension of the text. The questions in this guide should act as both scaffolding and safety net, guiding your students through a new reading and thinking process and allowing them to practice without fear of “failure.”

The writing prompts, however, provide rich assessment and evaluation opportunities. Every prompt is designed to invite your students to operate in one of the higher order domains, thus giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, and giving you the opportunity to evaluate their progress.

Whether you use *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* as the core of your literature curriculum or as a supplement, the guide and writing prompts are designed to help your students attain a deep understanding of the works they read. Ideally, they will gain the type of understanding demanded by Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and most state standards, including the Common Core State Standards of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. ♡



Introduction to *The House on Mango Street*

SANDRA CISNEROS'S *The House on Mango Street* is the story of Esperanza Cordero, a young Latina growing up in urban Chicago. Told from Esperanza's point of view in a series of vignettes, the book blurs boundaries between poetry and prose, novel and novella, memoir and fiction.

Originally published in 1984, *The House on Mango Street* received the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1985 and was met with widespread critical acclaim. However, despite the novel's popularity, some critics have argued that the book's feminist perspective perpetuates negative stereotypes about men, and that Esperanza's desire to leave Mango Street conflicts with Mexican-American values. Nonetheless, *The House on Mango Street* has become a staple of literary curricula in middle schools, high schools, and universities throughout the United States.

About the author

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago in 1954, to a Mexican father and a Chicana mother. Along with her six brothers, she spent her childhood in Chicago and Mexico. She received a B.A. from Loyola University in 1976 and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa in 1978. Her books of poetry include *Bad Boys* (1980), *The Rodrigo Poems* (1985), *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987), and *Loose Woman* (1994). She is also the author of *The House on Mango Street* (1984), *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), *Hairs: Pelitos* (1994), and *Caramelo* (2003).

Cisneros has been awarded prestigious fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts, a Texas Medal of the Arts, the Quality Paperback Book Club New Voices Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the PEN Center West Award for Best Fiction of 1991, and the Lannan Foundation Literary Award. She has worked as a high school teacher, administrative assistant, and arts administrator, and has taught at colleges and universities around the country, including the University of California, the University of Michigan, and the University of New Mexico.

Genre, form, and structure

The House on Mango Street crosses literary boundaries and incorporates characteristics of various forms, styles, and traditions. For this reason, the work's genre is difficult to classify. Cisneros herself has acknowledged the hybrid nature of the piece, saying, "I realize now that I was creating something new. I was cross-pollinating fiction and poetry and writing something that was the child of both. I was crossing borders and I didn't know it" ("*House on Mango Street* Celebrates 25 Years" 2). Among the critical ques-

tions to consider when attempting to categorize Cisneros's work are:

Is the novel composed of poetry or prose?

Even Cisneros stops short of categorizing *Mango Street* as one form or the other. Part of the work's uniqueness lies in its ability to marry prose-style narrative with poetic imagery, metaphor, and wordplay. Some critics and readers consider the work to be *prose poetry*, which, as its name suggests, is a genre involving work written in prose form but displaying poetic characteristics such as a vivid imagery, figurative speech, and rhythmic or emotional language.

What is the difference between an autobiographical novel and a memoir?

Once again, Cisneros's own words help to illuminate. The author admits that, when she began the work, she regarded it as memoir, but that "[b]y the time I finished it, my memoir was no longer memoir, no longer autobiographical." However, when asked whether or not she "is Esperanza," Cisneros has answered, "Yes. And no. And then again, perhaps maybe" (qtd. in Cruz 916). Given the author's own confusion surrounding the line between memoir and autobiographical fiction, it is no wonder that critics and readers struggle with this issue! Broadly speaking, memoir is generally regarded as non-fiction—authors of memoir present their work as true, as their own experience, and as an artfully rendered, and yet wholly accurate, portrayal of events. Autobiographical fiction, conversely, is intended to be read and regarded as fictional, an imaginative presentation of characters, places, and events inspired by or adapted from real-life situations. *Mango Street*, then, occupies the space somewhere between these planes, in which memoir gives way to fictional treatment but still maintains some ties to the author's true experience. The book could be called, perhaps, fictionalized memoir, or memoir-ized fiction.

What is the impact of the book's structure?

Mango Street's structure further complicates attempts to classify the work. While the work functions, ultimately, as a novel, it does share characteristics with works of other types. For example, the book's short length calls to mind the structure of a novella, which is an intermediate form of fiction that is sometimes defined simply as a "short novel." However, novellas generally fall between short stories and novels in complexity as well, and given the complexity of *The House on Mango Street* in both form and function, Cisneros's work more closely resembles a proper novel. A second important structural consideration is *Mango Street*'s use of vignettes. These short sections function as self-con-

her protagonist Esperanza as the general feminist and civil rights movements, they provide an even richer context for the stories Cisneros tells.

1950: The U.S. Congress votes to upgrade Puerto Rico's political status from protectorate to commonwealth. As a result, Puerto Ricans are United States citizens. They are represented in the House of Representatives by a Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico, who has a voice but no vote. Puerto Ricans do not participate in presidential elections. As a commonwealth and not a state or territory, Puerto Rico maintains sports sovereignty and sends its own teams to international events like the Olympics.

1951: The Bracero Program, in which Mexican temporary workers are sent to the United States to perform agricultural work, is formalized as the Mexican Farm Labor Supply Program and Mexican Labor Agreement. Approximately 350,000 Mexican workers will come to the United States each year until the program ends in 1964.

1952: Fulgencio Batista rises to power as the dictator of Cuba.

1954: In the landmark case *Hernandez v. Texas*, the Supreme Court rules that equal protection under the 14th Amendment is not limited to a “two-class” (i.e., black and white) theory of race, but rather extends to Latinos as well. The case helps to strike down discrimination based on class and ethnic distinctions, to pave the way for further legal challenges to discrimination against Latinos, and—in the specific context of the plaintiff in *Hernandez*—to establish Mexican-Americans as a “special class” entitled to equal protection under the law. *Hernandez* is also the first U.S. Supreme Court case to be argued by Mexican-American attorneys.

A U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service program known as “Operation Wetback” results in the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans. Thousands of U.S. citizens of Mexican descent are also detained during the operation.

In another landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court unanimously rules that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional. The ruling overturns the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had established the standard of “separate but equal” educational facilities divided according to race. *Brown v. Board of Education* clears the way for school desegregation around the nation.

1955: Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American teenager from Chicago, visits family in Mississippi and allegedly whistles at a white woman. He is kidnapped, beaten, killed, and dumped in the Tallahatchie River. Two white men, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, are arrested and tried for the murder but are acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury. The case has a galvanizing effect on nascent civil rights activists nationwide.

In Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. This inspires a large-scale bus boycott in Montgomery, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., and other activists.

1957: Martin Luther King, Jr., Charles K. Steele, and Fred L. Shuttlesworth establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which advocates non-violence and civil disobedience. King is elected president of the organization, which becomes a key organizing force in the civil rights movement.

The “Little Rock Nine”—a group of nine black students set to begin the school year at the newly desegregated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas—are blocked from entering the school, first by National Guardsman and later by mobs of townspeople, all of whom are acting on orders of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus. President Eisenhower eventually sends federal troops to escort the students into the school, and on September 25, Central High School is officially desegregated.

1959: Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista is overthrown during the Cuban Revolution, and Fidel Castro takes power. Rates of Cuban immigration to America increase sharply.

1960: Four African-American college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, begin a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter after being refused service due to their race. The event inspires student activists and triggers similar non-violent protests throughout the South and around the U.S.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is founded at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The FDA approves “The Pill” (oral contraceptives) for sale as birth control in the U.S.

Jorja English Palmer joins the Chicago Community Council Organization to battle for an end to school segregation.

Levels of Understanding:

Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains
to Explore Sandra Cisneros's



The House on Mango Street

SECTION ONE: CHAPTERS 1 - 10

Comprehension

1. What does Esperanza mean when she says that she hopes to have a house that she can “point to”?

2. Explain what Esperanza means when she says, “Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor.”

3. Why does Esperanza want to keep Nenny from playing with the Vargas children?

4. Why is Louie's cousin arrested?

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SECTION FIVE: CHAPTERS 34-40

Comprehension

1. To what (and to whom) is Esperanza referring when she says, “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain”?

2. Where is Sally while Esperanza is attacked in “The Red Clowns”?

3. To what is Esperanza referring when she says, “They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything told it wrong”?

Reader Response

1. In “The Monkey Garden,” which character is more sympathetic: Sally, who wants to spend time with boys her own age and act more mature, or Esperanza, who wants to continue playing with other children in the garden? Why?

The House on Mango Street

SECTION SIX: CHAPTERS 41-44

Comprehension

1. What are the three sisters doing when they ask to see Esperanza's hands and then turn the hands "over and over as if they were looking for something"? What do they tell Esperanza about her future?

2. Why does Esperanza confess to Alicia that she is sad?

3. In "Alicia & I Talking on Edna's Steps," why does Esperanza laugh at the idea that the mayor would come to Mango Street?

4. What is Cisneros suggesting when she has the sisters tell Esperanza that she must "come back" for the sake of those who cannot?
