

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The House on Mango Street

by Sandra Cisneros

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The House on Mango Street

Notes

This 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 in grade schools as well as university-level classes.

All references come from the Vintage Books edition of *The House on Mango Street*, copyright 1984.

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Background Information

SANDRA CISNEROS

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.

The example answers in this unit are “suggestions” only. They are intended to give the teacher a starting point for class discussion of the very poetic chapters in this novel. There are other possible interpretations of the symbols and lessons in this book that are equally valid to those presented in this unit.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. comment on the symbolism in this novel; specifically discuss the possible use of “feet” and “trees” as symbols.
2. discuss the author’s episodic style of writing and the unusual structure of the novel; be able to point out examples of
 - the use of vignettes or small literary sketches
 - the use of rhyming phrases similar to stanzas in a poem
 - the lack of traditional punctuation for conversations between the characters.
3. relate how the author expresses her cultural identity in the following areas:
 - the importance of family unity in times of crisis
 - the responsibility of the older siblings for the younger children
 - place of females in a Mexican/American household.
4. recognize the author’s frequent use of metaphors to describe life on Mango Street, particularly in regard to the
 - red balloon
 - music box
 - tree in Meme’s backyard
 - monkey garden.
5. discuss the lives of women on Mango Street and consider the extent to which the options available to them to improve their lives are limited by
 - early marriage
 - abuse by husbands and fathers
 - lack of life experience due to dominating men in their lives
 - pressure by society to be docile
 - burden of child rearing.
6. comment on the importance of names to the protagonist and illustrate how she is torn between two cultures.
7. discuss the protagonist’s definition of friendship and her perception of the importance of tolerance of individual differences.

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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"?

Meme Ortiz

1. Why do you think Meme and his dog both have two names?

2. 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?

3. 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."

Sally

1. Why does Sally's father prevent her from leaving their home after school?

2. At one point in this chapter, it is confusing as to whether the author is writing about Sally or about Esperanza. Find a sentence in this chapter that is about Sally but is also Esperanza's dream.

3. Assume Sally's dreams in the chapter are really Esperanza's dreams. What does Esperanza want more than any thing else?
