

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The House on Mango Street

by
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Book Information

Sandra Cisneros, The House on Mango Street
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A young girl living in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago ponders the advantages and disadvantages of her environment and evaluates her relationships with family and friends.

Award: American Book Award

Topics: Character Traits, Self Improvement; Community Life, Neighborhood; English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 5, 90%; Interpersonal Relationships, Neighbors; People, Family; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Aunt Lupe Esperanza's disabled aunt, whose death causes Esperanza to feel guilty after she imitated her

Carlos and Kiki Cordero Esperanza's brothers

Elenita a witch woman who reads cards to predict Esperanza's future

Esperanza Cordero the young girl who tells this story of life in her family and neighborhood

Geraldo a young Hispanic foreigner who dies tragically after dancing one night with Marin

Louie a neighbor whose cousin is arrested

Louie's cousin a young man who steals a car and is apprehended while taking the neighborhood children on a joyride

Lucy and Rachel Guerrero Esperanza's friends with whom she buys and shares a bicycle

Mama and Papa Esperanza's parents

Marin Louie's cousin from Puerto Rico, who is older and more street-wise than Esperanza

Minerva a married girl in Esperanza's neighborhood who has two children and an abusive husband

Nenny Cordero the younger sister Esperanza must take care of

Ruthie a woman who lives next door to Esperanza and likes playing with the children

Sally Esperanza's flirtatious friend who runs off with a salesman to escape her life on Mango Street

the old blue-veined sister an old woman who shares her wisdom with Esperanza about her future

Uncle Nacho Esperanza's uncle, who dances with her at a party

Vocabulary

abuelito a Spanish word meaning "grandfather"

babushka a woman's kerchief or scarf

marimba a musical instrument similar to a xylophone

voodoo a religious cult that practices mysterious rites using magic and sorcery

Synopsis

The House on Mango Street is the story of Esperanza Cordero, a young girl growing up in a Latino neighborhood in a large city. Her story is told through a series of vignettes which focus on her, her family, friends, and neighbors.

Esperanza makes it clear from the start that she does not like the house her parents have purchased on Mango Street. It is not the "dream house" they had always talked of buying. She also dislikes her name, which she claims is too long and funny sounding.

The vignettes show Esperanza's emergence into adolescence. She bemoans being weighed down by her younger sister, Nenny, for whom she is responsible. She does not make friends easily, but strikes up a friendship with Rachel and Lucy, who

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live nearby. Things are not always smooth between them as evidenced by the big fight they have when Lucy calls Esperanza's mother "ugly."

Esperanza tells of other characters who live in the neighborhood: a woman with a houseful of children, a childlike woman who enjoys playing with the neighborhood children, a young man who steals a car and takes a joyride with the neighborhood children, a flirtatious girl who runs off with a salesman, and a witch woman who reads the cards to tell Esperanza's fortune.

Several characters seem to make a more profound impression on Esperanza. Her disabled Aunt Lupe, who was once a star swimmer, has become blind, and Esperanza visits her to read her poetry and books. One day, however, Esperanza plays a game in which she cruelly imitates her aunt's pathetic movements. Her aunt dies shortly thereafter, and Esperanza feels much guilt.

Esperanza is also touched by the tragedy that befalls Geraldo, a young man who is barely surviving in America and who dies violently one night after going dancing with Marin, a neighbor's cousin.

Esperanza's love for her mother is obvious. She seems to love everything about her, including the way her hair smells. Her mother urges her to make something of her life by getting an education, advice Esperanza appears to heed.

Besides her mother, an old, blue-veined woman may have had the greatest effect on Esperanza. This insightful woman approved of Esperanza's name and entreated her to return to Mango Street to help those people who would not be able to leave it. She also reminds Esperanza that Mango Street would always be a part of who she is.

The story ends on a somewhat hopeful note when Esperanza expresses her dreams for her future. She longs to have a real home of her own where she will have peace. She also realizes the importance of Mango Street in her life.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Esperanza and her friends entertain themselves by "clomping" around the neighborhood in some old high-heeled shoes a neighbor gives them. Many children try to act more grown up by doing things like this. In what other ways do children pretend to be grown-up? Do you think this kind of playing is important for children and, if so, why?

Answers might include that children play doctor, set up a lemonade stand, or play teacher to pretend they are grown-ups. Play activities such as these can give children a basic social understanding of the adult world.

Literary Analysis

In *The House on Mango Street*, the story of Esperanza Cordero is told along with the stories of her friends, relatives, and neighbors. Of all the characters in this story, which one do you think has the greatest positive influence on Esperanza, and why? How do the weaker characters also have a positive influence on Esperanza?

Answers will vary, but positive influences might include her mother, who advised her to get an education, or the old blue-veined woman who tells her to make sure she returns to Mango Street to help those who are not able to leave. Weaker characters influence Esperanza also. She realizes their errors and wants a better life than they have.

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Inferential Comprehension

From the beginning of this story, Esperanza expresses her dislike for the house on Mango Street. She complains that it is not the "dream house" her parents had always talked of buying. What do you think causes Esperanza to dislike her environment so much that she longs to escape? Explain your answer.

Answers might include that she sees no future for herself if she stays there, since there are few opportunities. On a daily basis she witnesses the ugliness, abuse, and danger in the neighborhood. Also, she aspires to go to college and will likely leave to pursue her education.

Constructing Meaning

Esperanza states near the beginning of *The House on Mango Street* that her name means hope. The old blue-veined woman says it is a good name. Do you think Esperanza is a suitable name for this character? Explain your answer.

Students might state that it is a good name for her because she has high hopes for making a life for herself away from Mango Street. Some students might say it is not a good name for her because she seems so negative about her surroundings and the aspects of her life.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization The main character of this story, Esperanza, has a somewhat unusual name. Have your students create a character sketch of Esperanza by using each of the letters in her name to start words that describe her character. For example, "E" could stand for "eager" since she was eager to leave Mango Street, or "A" for "author" since she liked to write. Students can add suitable illustrations if desired.

Extending Meaning Esperanza dislikes being responsible for her younger sister, Nenny. Many older brothers and sisters babysit for younger siblings. Have your students make a list of the pros and cons of having to babysit or be

responsible for a younger brother or sister.

Making Predictions This story ends while Esperanza is still quite young, perhaps of high school age. She expresses some of her life's hopes at the end of the book. Based on these hopes, write a one-page summary of what you think Esperanza will go on to do in her life.

Identifying Persuasive Language At one point in this story, Esperanza decides she wants to eat lunch at school in the canteen. In order to do so, she must persuade her mother that it is a good idea. Have students recall a time in their own lives when they needed to persuade a parent to let them do something. Then have them write the persuasive dialogue they used and their parent's response. Or, they can create a scenario that is fictional and write a persuasive dialogue.