

Life of a young girl in "the house on mango street"



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The House on Mango Street is a piece written by Sandra Cisneros, an American of Mexican Heritage. It was published in 1984 and details a year in the life of a young girl, Esperanza Cordero, who moves to Mango Street, a Mexican enclave of Chicago, at the age of twelve. The story deals with relationships, family, neighborhood and the aspirations of the main character to own her own house.

The house that she and her family move into is the very first house they have owned, but Esperanza is disappointed with its dilapidated state and longs to own her own house. The House on Mango Street is a coming of age novel that explores the challenges of being different and the drive to carve out a place for yourself in the world as a young Latino woman.

Esperanza and her family, comprised of her father, mother, her younger sister, and two younger brothers moved to a house on Mango Street. It is the first house that they own as a family, and is located in an impoverished section of Chicago, Illinois. The family has lived in many different places, and Esperanza ponders on how much they have moved around throughout the years. Although she is glad that they own a house, she is disappointed by it because it is not what she expected, even though it is a significant improvement from their previous residence.

On moving to Mango Street, Esperanza makes new friends, among them Rachael and Lucy, who live along the same street. She, alongside her sister and her newfound friends, explore the neighborhood and have many adventures in the process. On the verge of adolescence, the girls feel sexually vulnerable at times, such as when they stroll around their

neighborhood in high heeled shoes. (Burcar, High heels as a disciplinary practice of femininity in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* 9).

Esperanza experiences this sexual vulnerability first-hand when she is kissed by a much older man at her first job. In *The First Job* Esperanza talks about how she is taken advantage of by her boss at work, I thought that I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go. (Cisneros 55). Esperanza doesn't speak of this again, but her adolescence is tainted by it. Esperanza describes one of her friends who influences her in more ways than she knows when it comes to understanding her sexuality. Esperanza goes on to describe all the things that Marin teaches her, She is the one who told us how Davey's the Baby's sister got pregnant and what cream is best for taking off moustache hair and if you count the white flecks on your fingernails you can know how many boys (Cisneros 27). Marin is viewed as someone who lives a fun rebellious lifestyle, and Esperanza looks up to her superior knowledge of womanhood. Ultimately her beliefs and her perception of people are changed.

For the first half of the year, the girls are still firmly rooted in childhood and are more than excited to make the very most of their youth. They play games such as skipping rope and ride their shared bicycle around the neighborhood, as well as explore the local junk shop. Esperanza goes to school but feels outcasted there because she is embarrassed by her uncommon name and ashamed because her family is poor. Esperanza has trouble fitting in at school and at home, but she continues to grow up and find her way of fitting in.

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However, over the summer, Esperanza slowly loses her childhood to puberty. Physically, sexually and emotionally she matures significantly (Cruz 916). For the first time, she is excited boys begin watching her dance and takes great pleasure in fantasizing about them. Her hips grow, and she experiences her first crush. During this period, she is sexually assaulted and starts to write in a bid to escape the neighborhood and as a means of self-expression. She only shares the poems she pens with the trusted, mature women in her life. Her bond and affinity for the adults are strengthened when her grandfather and aunt passed away, and she starts to pay close attention to the women along Mango Street. She realizes that they are more stuck in their houses and situations than she is.

Esperanza explains that she is named after her grandmother, a headstrong woman who refused to be married until her great-grandfather literally kidnapped her and married her forcefully. After that, her grandmother spent her days gazing sadly out of a window. She and her grandmother were born in the Chinese year of the horse, which is supposed to be unlucky for women. Esperanza refuses to believe this and states that she thinks the story of the name is a lie made up by men who are uncomfortable with strong women. She worries that she will inherit both her great-grandmother's name and sorrow. She fears that she will be stuck, just like her great-grandmother and the women on Mango Street.

At the start of the school year, Esperanza becomes friends with a girl named Sally, who is more sexually mature and experienced than Esperanza. Sally is abused by her father and uses boys as an escape mechanism, and this makes Esperanza uncomfortable. Their friendship results in Esperanza being

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sexually assaulted by some boys when Sally leaves her alone. This incidence, along with the lives of the women Esperanza befriends on her street, reinforces Esperanza's desire to move away from Mango Street and to live a more fulfilling life.

When, however, she is strong enough emotionally to leave, Esperanza is unable to do so fully, and she realizes that she will never be able to detach herself completely because she feels the need to help the women of Mango Street. By the end of the year, she has matured tremendously, and her desire to relocate is even stronger. She uses writing to escape emotionally from Mango Street with all its challenges and appreciates that writing will eventually help her to escape physically as well in the future.

The House on Mango Street is a study in contrasts. Although it is a continuous story, it is broken down into vignettes that are part of the whole but can be read on their own. This is a representation of the characters in the novel, who lead separate lives yet come together to weave the story in the book. The vignettes are of varying lengths, indicative of the different kinds of impact the different characters have on Esperanza (Sun 2370). The vignettes differing lengths is also mirrored by the way Esperanza tells her story, in disjointed, broken sentences. The different lengths give the narration a choppy feel, which reflects perfectly Esperanza's life, which is far from smooth and even-keeled.

Through the narration, one gets a glimpse of a Mexican woman's life, which appears oppressed and full of longing. This is brought out in Marin's life, who is confined to the compound and has to sneak out of the house to be

herself, through dancing under the street lights. It is seen in Esperanzar's great-grandmother, who is kidnapped and forced into marriage, and spends the rest of her life wallowing in her misery. Esperanzar's great-grandmother gives the impression of being a prisoner of circumstances, an impression reinforced by the fact that she was forced into marriage, and hence into the life she lived. This confinement is seen in Esperanzar's wanting to get a house of her own, quiet and clean as an unmarked paper. This could be interpreted as Esperanza wanting to make a clean break from her current life and start fresh, unburdened by her past or aspects of her current life (Cruz 930).

Esperanzar's desire to escape her life is seen in her desire to write her own story, a desire to almost rewrite her history. Her community places a certain expectation on women, and she feels the need to break free of these expectations. She also wants to run away from the poverty of her neighborhood and the oppressive expectations and living conditions of the society. Women in her locality have limited options, and their only major recourse seems to be marriage, and Esperanza is keen to broaden her prospects, hence her desire to escape.

Marin personifies the drive to pursue one's happiness regardless of one's circumstances. She models for Esperanza the fact that no one is stuck to particular circumstances and it is a person's responsibility to pursue his or her dreams and happiness. This is particularly emotional when contrasted with the women on Mango Street whose lives seem to be stuck beyond a certain level. It answers Esperanzar's mother's statement where she declares sadly, that she could have been somebody.

Through glimpses into the lives of Esperanza's neighbors, we get to see a full picture of what life is on Mango Street and the ramifications of the different decisions made by certain characters. Through the actions taken by the other older women and the consequences of those actions, Esperanza is presented with many paths to choose from, with the consequences played out in front for her. In a way, the lives of the older women act as a roadmap for her.

Another key theme in this book is choice. In Mango Street, people make different choices and bear the consequences. Characters who resign themselves to their circumstances are pictured as stuck and unhappy, while others, such as Marin, work hard to grasp at shreds of happiness and strive to make their desired life a reality at any cost. Although negative things do happen, such as Sally being abused by her father, ultimately, everybody has some sort of choice in how he or she responds to the circumstances. This concept is mainly brought out in Esperanza's desire to move out of the neighborhood and her belief that writing may be her ticket out of Mango Street

Another theme is the pursuit of self-identity, which influences everything that Esperanza does. She defines herself as a writer as well as a woman, although her perception of both changes as the novel progresses. At first, Esperanza wants to change her name to something that is less difficult to pronounce, and that would tie her to her family, and acquire another one she feels defines whom she thinks she is. She wants to move to her own house where she can forge her own identity (Burcar , Fluminensia: Journal for Philological Research 121). After she becomes sexually aware, Esperanza

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wants to be beautiful, so as to be attractive, but cruel enough that men will not try to hurt her. To this end, she becomes friends with Sally, who is more sexually experienced. However, after her sexual assault, she no longer wants to be cruel and beautiful and is unsure of how to define herself as a strong woman.

Eventually, Esperanza stops trying to separate herself from her family, heritage, and neighborhood by acquiring a new name and accepts her position in the community. She no longer forces herself to develop sexually when she is not ready and chooses to define herself regarding her writing. Esperanza learns that the important thing is not how others see you or define you externally, but how you view and define yourself on the inside.

On Mango Street, gender roles are entrenched, and men have no issues with beating up their wives and daughters or confining them to the house. Being a female is enough to justify beatings and rape, as in Esperanza's case at the carnival. Esperanza fights this stereotype by rejecting gender roles, refusing marriage and by not acting like a powerless female, as expected by her community. By rejecting stereotypes, Esperanza reclaims her freedom and gains a sense of power.

Friendship runs course throughout the book. Esperanza feels isolated and strives to address this by seeking out friendships. She has many types of friendships, those of her peers and older women. As she matures, so does the depth and intensity of her friendships. At first, friendship entails sharing a bike and playing together and blossoms into something that depends upon

much more substance and shared values. Esperanza feels that women are isolated and should, therefore, be responsible to look out for each other.

Femininity is a major part of *The House on Mango Street*, and Esperanza strives to understand it, especially with her dawning adolescence. She notices that beauty is the basis of feminine power and envies the beauty of the women close to her. However, she realizes that beauty is not a guaranteed source of power. She strives to gain power that is more enduring, and which grants her freedom hence her interest in writing.

Sandra Cisneros uses simple but poetic language to communicate, and this gives *The House on Mango Street* an interesting tone. She includes Spanish phrases that give the narrative authenticity and color. The break from proper grammar and the use of slang adds to its authenticity and immediacy and draws the reader in as though he or she is part of the story. Although the story is told in the voice of a young girl, it is convincing and believable because of the language used and the details provided.

Sandra Cisneros grabs the reader's interest by wandering from one subject to another and introducing a bunch of different characters briefly. The reader is drawn into the story because it feels so light and immediate. This seeming randomness explores different themes such as identity, loss, escape love, friendship, and roles without seeming to. Her style addresses taboo subjects such as violence and sexual assault matter-of-factly yet sensitively, without making the subject a victim or a statistic. She explores sexual inequality and oppression without apportioning blame. In short, through her writing, the reader feels as though they are looking into people's houses and glimpsing

bits and pieces of their lives. This makes *The House on Mango Street* feel more real and authentic to the person reading.

The House on Mango Street is a narrative that addresses culture. It points out the challenges that Chicanos face and the derogatory stereotypes they encounter and perpetuate. The writer uses language as a metaphor for the divide that exists between Mexican Americans and the rest of the country. Language and culture play a part in segregating Chicanos but what keeps them isolated is mainly racism and poverty, which ultimately brings shame. Therefore, the isolation is brought on them by people of other cultures and by the Chicanos themselves.

The House on Mango Street strives to capture the sense of being different experienced by people when they move from their original home. It brings out the challenges faced by women especially, more so young girls, who may not feel that they are good enough. It captures perfectly the challenges immigrants face because of being poor, different and from a different culture (Sun 2370). The book strives to show that being different need not be a source of embarrassment. Rather, it can be a source of celebration and pride.

The House on Mango Street is a call to embrace oneself fully regardless of one's current circumstances. It explores the challenges that come with being different and the consequences of letting fate run its course. It explores the challenges young girls face when they are coming of age, and addresses the choices they make and the likely consequences of those

choices. The narrative also points out that circumstances are not set in stone and can be changed if one is ready and willing to do everything it takes.