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Sample MonkeyNotes

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The House on Mango Street

by

Sandra Cisneros

1988



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting of the story is a poor Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. Judging from the cars people drive, it is probably the 1960's. The neighborhood is very close-knit, full of immigrants who.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Esperanza - Esperanza is the young (about twelve years old) Mexican-American girl around whom the story revolves. She has just moved to Mango Street, and the entire book is about her reactions to the people and things around her, and the way those shape her as she matures over a period of one year.

Minor Characters

Nenny - Esperanza's younger sister. Esperanza cares for Nenny, though she also finds her annoying because of her dreamy, childish attitude. They often play together, and are, in some ways, closer to each other than to any other character.

Lucy and Rachel - Sisters who always appear together, they are mischievous and brash, and don't care much what other people think of them, which is why Esperanza likes them. Together, the.....

CONFLICT

Esperanza, the **protagonist**, has no real antagonist except, perhaps, herself. The story concerns her journey to maturity. Conflicts in the story often arise because of Esperanza's misunderstanding of herself. For example, she makes fun of her sick aunt, then realizes how much she values her aunt's friendship, and feels terrible about what she has done. Her shyness is another aspect of her immaturity that forces conflict upon her: she wants to be like bolder girls she knows, who have secret meetings with boys, but does not have the courage. Additionally, Esperanza must mature enough to discover her own identity, and understand how the Mango Street she hates so much fits into her life.

The **climax**, then, comes toward the end of the book, when Esperanza realizes she does not want to imitate any of her friends, opting instead to be her own person. At the same time, she.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The story is told by Esperanza, and begins when she first moves to Mango Street, a poor, Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. Esperanza says that she has lived in many different places. She implies that she is close to her family, and describes their interactions and even their hair. She tells us she does not like her name, because it is too long and because it was her grandmother's name. Her grandmother did not want to get married, but was forced to by Esperanza's grandfather. Slowly, Esperanza begins to meet people in the neighborhood. She meets Cathy, a stuck-up girl, and Lucy and Rachel, who live across the street. Sisters, these two will become Esperanza's best friends on Mango Street. They are loud and sassy, just the opposite of Esperanza, but this is what she likes about them.

Esperanza talks about her younger sister, Nenny, to whom she feels close in a strange way, even though sometimes they annoy each other. For example, when they visit a used furniture store and the owner plays a music box with music so beautiful Esperanza begins to cry, Nenny naively tries to buy the box. The man says it is not for sale, and Esperanza is embarrassed by her sister.

Esperanza describes other people from the neighborhood. Meme Ortiz has a dog that is big and clumsy, just like him. Louie's cousin got arrested for stealing a car. Marin is waiting for some rich man to find her and take her

away from Mango Street. Esperanza understands that people feel scared when they come to Mango Street because the area is poor and they don't know everyone there is harmless. But she also knows that her own community is scared when they go to other neighborhoods, too. She continues with.....

THEMES

Major Themes

Maturity - The main theme of the book is Esperanza's increasing maturity. It is in evidence throughout the book, as Esperanza talks to older female characters, trying to determine who her role models will be, or as she overcomes her insecurities and learns about her own strengths and weaknesses.

Home and Identity - Throughout the book, Esperanza attaches meaning to where she lives: she takes it personally as an extension of herself. Thus, the fact that she is unhappy and.....

MOOD

The mood of the story is highly influenced by Esperanza's own mood, and the mood of the story is uneven to reflect Esperanza's uneven moods. When she is happy, as in "Our Good Day," the mood is joyous, relaxed, and untroubled. When she is frightened or hurt, as in "Red Clowns," the mood reflects.....

AUTHOR INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Born on December 20, 1954 in Chicago, Sandra Cisneros moved back and forth between Chicago and Mexico City throughout her childhood. Her father was Mexican and had close ties to his family, while her mother was Mexican-American and had lived her life in Chicago. Cisneros was the youngest child of seven, and the only daughter. She was lonely for much of her childhood because her family rarely stayed in one place long enough for her to make friends. She attended Loyola University in Chicago and then the Iowa Writer's Workshop. It was at this workshop that she got the idea for "The House on Mango Street," perhaps her most famous book. The class was studying the poetics of space, and reading an essay on the metaphor of the mind as a house with many rooms. Cisneros realized that everyone in her class could relate to this idea except her. She assumed that those who understood this metaphor had never had to clean someone else's house for a living, or get evicted. Previously, Cisneros had tried to copy established writers, who were usually white and

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

While the story is not particularly dependent on external historical events, it is useful to know that Chicago is a strikingly segregated city, even today. This certainly plays a role in the dynamics of Esperanza's community, allowing the neighbors closeness, but also isolating them from other parts of Chicago.

In terms of style, the book is unique. Not exactly either poetry or prose, Esperanza's story is organized in a series of vignettes. This allows the reader to gain a certain intimacy with Esperanza. We are told what she thinks and how she feels at the most important moments in her life for that.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1: The House on Mango Street

Summary

Esperanza Cordero is a young girl growing up in a Hispanic family in Chicago. Poverty forces them to move more times than she can count. By the time they move to the Mango Street house, there are six of them: "Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, my sister Nenny and me." Esperanza likes the new house because it belongs to them. They don't have to worry about landlord problems, like broken water pipes that don't get fixed. Esperanza has always felt ashamed of living in apartment buildings, and was happy to move into a house. However, the house isn't exactly the fantasy that Mama and Papa have always promised their children: there's no yard, the front door

sticks, the windows are tiny, and there are only three bedrooms. Her parents tell her the house is temporary, but Esperanza doesn't believe them.

Notes

The theme of Esperanza being ashamed of her economic status is a prominent one in the book. Esperanza does not exactly feel ashamed of her family; in fact, the family is generally close-knit and happy, but she is keenly aware of the disadvantages of being poor, and has dreamt of prosperity from a very young age. When she says, "I knew then I had to have a house," the reader sees the first example of her independence: it seems that she wants a house of her *own*, and is determined to get one. She sees through her parents' wishful thinking in an almost cynical way (her father talks about the house they will get as he holds a lottery ticket). She doesn't seem to trust them to acquire what the whole family wants: a spacious, beautiful house. She juxtaposes her parents' fantasies with the reality they provide her with: a house that is too small, in a bad neighborhood. "I know how these things go," she says wisely, when her parents insist that the house on Mango is not permanent. Her parents are almost like children in her eyes: she seems to know more about life than they do.

CHAPTER 2: Hairs

Summary

Esperanza describes the hair of each of her family members: Carlos' is thick and straight, Kick's is like fur, her father's is like a broom, her own is lazy and won't obey pins, and her mother's hair is "like little rosettes." Based on the highly specific and artful descriptions (Nenny's hair is "slippery--slides out of your hand"), the family is clearly very close and Esperanza feels attached to each of them, especially her mother. She remembers lying in bed with Mama, feeling safe and smelling her skin and her hair.

Notes

Esperanza reveals herself here as a thoughtful, sensitive, literate girl, who is deeply attuned to the world around her. She uses the type of hair each member of her family has to symbolize something about their personalities. Kiki, the baby of the family, has hair like fur, which makes him seem cute and babyish. Papa's hair is "like a broom, all up in the air," which seems to say something about his role as a kind, fatherly figure, harried but still in control. Most significant are Esperanza's descriptions of her own hair and her mother's hair. Esperanza's hair never obeys barrettes or braids, which suggests her wildness and her inability to be feminine and alluring in the way that she wants to be. She describes her hair as "lazy," (rather than, say, free-spirited): she seems to blame herself and find fault with her hair, rather than accepting it the way it is. Her own hair is directly contrasted with that of her mother, which is extremely delicate, "like little rosettes, like little candy circles all curly and pretty".

Her mother is girlish in the way Esperanza would like to be. Clearly, Mrs. Cordero pays attention to her appearance: she keeps her hair in pincurls all day. However, when she lets her hair down at night, she becomes a strong maternal figure for Esperanza, caring for her and comforting her. Esperanza specifically remembers smelling her mother's hair when her mother lets her into her bed. It smells like baking bread, a smell that calls to mind the comforts of food and home. In this remembered scene, Papa is asleep when Mama lets Esperanza into their bed, and his snoring fills their ears. The sound comforts Esperanza, but is almost background noise: the scene is between mother and daughter.

CHAPTER 3: Boys and Girls

Summary

Esperanza describes the boys and girls as living "in separate worlds"--her brothers, Carlos and Kiki, refuse to be seen talking to their sisters outside the house. Her brothers are best friends, but Esperanza thinks her sister Nenny is too young to be her best friend, yet she feels responsible for her. Esperanza is an intelligent girl who longs for a best friend her own age, one who will understand her jokes, one she can tell secrets to.

Notes

Esperanza alludes to two of the main themes of the book in this short chapter: the division between boys and girls (or men and women) in Hispanic culture, and Esperanza's feelings of loneliness. The fact that Carlos and Kiki will not speak to their sisters outside the house, even though they have plenty to say when at home, strikes Esperanza as fake, a custom she finds silly. Indeed, when Esperanza describes why Nenny has to play with her (She can't play with those Vargas kids or she'll turn out just like them) she seems to be saying it in a grown-up voice, repeating something that has been said to her, but not really believing it. However, her family is close enough that she feels a strong sense of responsibility for her younger sister. Meanwhile, she feels lonely, but hopeful: she believes that one day she will have a best friend. Until then, she sees herself as a "red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor." This quote reveals her as an ambitious girl who knows exactly what she is missing, psychologically speaking, in her current life. She is well aware that she would benefit from a friend who was intelligent enough for her to talk to, with whom she could share her dreams. With no friends, only responsibility for Nenny, Esperanza feels "anchored" to the reality of her young life, unable to exercise the freedom of imagination she values so greatly.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Esperanza - Without a doubt the single most important in the book, Esperanza's story is told entirely through her eyes. This makes sense because the book is really about her, and the changes in her life over the year she lives on Mango Street. She begins as a shy, lonely, introverted girl who has no friends and often fears what people will think of her. Her father is Mexican and her mother is Mexican-American. The family moves often, and this book concerns the year they spend in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. Dreamy and romantic, and sometimes finding it difficult to fit in, she dreams about what it would be like to have friends and a boyfriend. She is generally kind and concerned with others' feelings, even people she.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

"The House on Mango Street" is Esperanza's story, and she tells it with humor, sadness, introspection and joy. It begins when she first arrives at the house, a dilapidated building in a Hispanic ghetto in 1960's Chicago. She tells us about the many different times she has moved, and that she has always wanted a house—but not a house like this one, which is too small and sad. This wish for a house will follow Esperanza throughout the book.

When she arrives there she is lonely and shy, and so is very attuned to the people around her. She gives a touching description of each member of her family's hair. She describes the way her two younger brothers avoid her and her younger sister Nenny (Magdalena) when they are outside, but are friendly when no one is watching. She reveals her insecurity when she tells us how much she hates her name, which means hope in English, and "too many letters" in Spanish. It is her grandmother's name, a woman who refused to get married until she was carried away by Esperanza's grandfather. Though she stayed with him, she was unhappy for the rest of her life, and Esperanza is afraid of ending up like her. This is the.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Major Themes

Maturity - Perhaps the most important theme of the book is Esperanza's progress from childhood to adulthood. It is no accident that the book takes place in approximately her twelfth year, when she is too old for children's games but not old enough to be a confident adult. This confusion is in evidence in her thoughts about boys (she dreams about having adventures with them, but is afraid to talk to them and is unable to stand up for herself when they harass her.) She thinks about what kind of power womanhood will bring (she admires Sally's control over boys and makes up rhymes about the kind of hips she wants) but.....

Home and Identity - Cisneros has said that she began writing "The House on Mango Street" after reading about "the poetics of space" at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. There, she learned that everyone in the class but her understood their consciousness in terms of "house" metaphors—the "house" of memory, with its different rooms, for example. Cisneros, who moved repeatedly as a child and never.....

POINT OF VIEW

The story is told exclusively from Esperanza's point of view. For the most part, this offers the reader an intimacy that would be unavailable if the book were written *about* Esperanza—since it is, in a sense, *by* her, we have a much greater insight not only into what she thinks but also the way she thinks. For example, when she describes her encounter with Sire and his friends, she says, "They didn't scare....."

STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. What does Esperanza like about Sally? What does she dislike?
2. How does Esperanza feel about her family?
3. Does Esperanza want a boyfriend?.....

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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