



## Study Guide (High School):

# The House on Mango Street

By Sandra Cisneros, adapted for the stage by Amy Ludwig

### Table of Contents

#### I. General Information

- A. About Teatro Visión
- B. About this Study Guide
- C. Learning Objectives

#### II. Before the Play

- A. Biography of Sandra Cisneros
- B. Synopsis of the Play
- C. Read & Respond
- D. Genre: Narrative Vignette
- E. Themes
- F. Motifs
- G. Symbols

#### III. Exploring the Themes: Project Ideas

- A. Visual Literacy
- B. Gender Roles
- C. Quotation Station
- D. Image Theater
- E. Found Poetry
- F. Literature Circles
- G. Character-Based Debates
- H. Inner City Barrios
- I. Sex & Violence
- J. Chicana Feminism

#### IV. After the Play

- A. General
- B. Characters
- C. Style/Genre
- D. Major Themes
- E. Literary Connections

#### V. Standards

Teatro Visión contact: Leigh Henderson • [leigh@teatrovision.org](mailto:leigh@teatrovision.org) • (408) 294.6621  
[www.teatrovision.org](http://www.teatrovision.org)

Study Guide by Rosa González • [www.facilitatingpower.com](http://www.facilitatingpower.com) • [rosa@facilitatingpower.com](mailto:rosa@facilitatingpower.com)

## I. General Information

### A. About Teatro Visión

Teatro Visión is a Chicana theater company serving the Latinx and other diverse communities of the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Our mission is to create theater rooted in Chicana and Latinx experiences to inspire the people of Santa Clara Valley and beyond to feel, think, and act to create a better world. Our activities include producing and presenting theater, focusing on Latinx and Chicana communities and artists; developing new works of theater through a participatory, community-based process; and offering theater classes and workshops for youth and adults that teach performance as a tool for social change.

### B. About this Study Guide

- ◆ This study guide is designed for high school teachers of the humanities (language arts, social studies, theater, etc.)
- ◆ Simply reading through the study guide will familiarize you with the play, the novel, and how you may want to frame the experience of the play for your students.
- ◆ Activities range from study questions to full projects.
- ◆ Pick and choose activities as they best fit within your larger curriculum.

- ◆ While the guide is divided into sections: *Before*, *During* and *After* the play, you may find that many of the activities could be useful at any phase of the play viewing experience.
- ◆ Pages labeled, "Student Page" are designed so that the teacher can photocopy them for students.
- ◆ If you choose to use the student page, "After the Play," consider having students choose 1 or 2 questions from each section or have small groups tackle one section (e.g. 'genre' or 'character') and then present to the class, etc.
- ◆ Suggestion: Print a color copy of the study guide and make color overheads of useful pages. When discussing the play with the class, use the overhead as a visual.

### C. Learning Objectives

*Students will—*

- ▶ See live theater as a form of creative expression
- ▶ Observe what happens when dramatic literature-characters, actions, language and imagery move from the page to the stage.
- ▶ Explore vital themes, both universal and specific to the Chicana experience.

Note: All activities in this guide are standards-based (English/ Language arts & Theater Arts).

Study Guide: *The House on Mango Street* Student Page

## II. Before the Play



Sandra Cisneros,  
Author of *The House on Mango Street*

## A. Biography of Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros (born December 20, 1954 in Chicago) is a Latina author and poet best known for her novel *The House on Mango Street*. She is also the author of *Caramelo*, (2002), *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) and a collection of poems, *Loose Woman*. Her books and poetry have been translated into over a dozen languages.

Sandra was the only daughter in her family of seven. Her Mexican father, Mexican-American mother, and her family moved through a series of run-down apartments in the poor neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side. While a teenager, her family realized her dream of purchasing a house, although she considered it old and ugly. This probably inspired much of *The House on Mango Street*. Her writing is influenced by many aspects of her life, including her childhood, her family, and her Mexican heritage.

She has taught as a visiting professor at Britain State University, California State University- Chico, University of California, Berkeley and Irvine, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. *The House on Mango Street* was awarded the American Book Award by the Before Columbus Foundation, in 1985, among other awards, and in 1995 Cisneros was named a MacArthur Fellow.

## B. Synopsis of the Play

The House on Mango Street (HMS) covers a year in the life of Esperanza, a twelve-year-old girl who moves with her family into a house on Mango Street in the center of a crowded Latinx neighborhood in Chicago.

Narrated by an older Esperanza, the play charts her life as she matures during the year, both physically and emotionally. The play also includes the stories of many of Esperanza's neighbors, giving a full picture of the neighborhood and showing the many influences surrounding her.

Esperanza quickly befriends Lucy and Rachel, who along with Esperanza's little sister Nenny, have many adventures in the small space of their neighborhood. Esperanza begins to write as a way of expressing herself and to escape the suffocating effect of the neighborhood. She later

realizes that she will never fully be able to leave Mango Street behind, and vows that after she leaves she will return to help the people she has left behind.

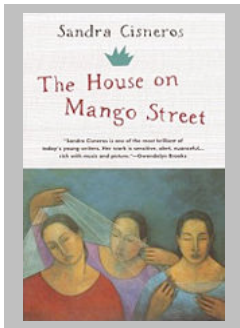
## C. Read and Respond

Read the synopsis of the play and the biography of Sandra Cisneros and answer the following questions:

1. In what ways is House on Mango Street inspired by Cisneros' own life?
2. What is the significance of a home to families? --To your family? --To Sandra Cisneros' family?"
3. If you could ask Sandra Cisneros three questions, what would you ask her?

Optional: Through internet research and further reading, find answers to these questions.

"I always tell people that I became a writer not because I went to school but because my mother took me to the library. I wanted to become a writer so I could see my name in the card catalog."  
-Sandra Cisneros



The novel by Sandra Cisneros.

## D. Genre: Narrative Vignette

*The House on Mango Street* is a collection of vignettes that are not quite poems and not quite full stories.

Esperanza narrates these vignettes in first-person present tense, focusing on her day-to-day activities but sometimes narrating sections that are just a series of observations. The vignettes can be as short as two or three paragraphs -long and sometimes contain internal rhymes.

Choose one or more vignettes from the novel and:

1. Identify some of the poetic devices Cisneros' uses in her writing (e.g. imagery, rhyme, metaphor, personification, repetition).
2. How does the style of the writing (i.e. short vignettes, many characters, unresolved conflicts, etc.) help to capture the reality of a young girl growing up in an inner city?
3. Characterization: How does Cisneros help the reader to know her characters? Choose a character and find examples of how Cisneros brings that character to life through what the character says, what others say about him/her, what the character does, and how s/he changes over time.

### 4. Explore the genre:

- ◆ Write your own series of short narratives about your experiences growing up. Use figurative language and creative writing structure to help the reader see and feel your short stories.

## Main Characters:

- ◆ Esperanza
- ◆ Nenny
- ◆ Rachel
- ◆ Sally
- ◆ Lucy
- ◆ Mama
- ◆ Papa

## E. Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

- The Power of language
  - The Struggle for Personal Identity & Space
  - Sexuality vs. Independence
  - Growing up
  - Gender roles
  - Home/Neighborhood
  - Death
  - Shame
1. How do these themes play out in *The House on Mango Street*?
  2. What connections can you draw between one of these themes in *HMS* and the same theme in another piece of literature, a movie, or your own life?

## F. Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

- The Power of Names
- Falling
- Women by Windows
  - Based on the play or on the novel, what do you think Cisneros is communicating with each of these motifs in *HMS*?

## G. Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

- Shoes
- Trees
- Poetry



1. What do each of these symbols represent in *The House on Mango Street*?
2. What do these symbols mean to you?

# Study Guide: *The House on Mango Street* Teacher Page

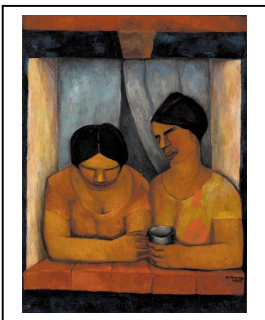
## III. Project Ideas: Exploring the Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Note: These projects could occur anytime during the *House on Mango Street* experience as they serve both to build background knowledge for the play and to reflect on the play.



Barrio by Oscar Ortiz.

*"No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here."*



Dos Mujeres en la Ventana by Rufino Tamayo.

- **Visual Literacy:** This is a creative way to engage your students around the themes of *The HMS*: Make color overhead transparencies of fine art pieces (paintings, murals, etc.) that embody given themes from *HMS*. For each painting, prompt students to share aloud or write down (or both):

- What do you see in this painting?
- What ideas or feelings does this piece express?
- What story does this painting tell?
- What connections can you make between this piece and *The House on Mango Street*? What theme from *HMS* does this painting convey?

The point is to spark interest in the main ideas of the play and get students thinking symbolically about the feelings and stories that images portray.

- **Gender Roles:** Conduct an anthropological report on gender roles in your family. The word gender refers to our identities as either male, female, gender non-conforming, gender queer, etc. In *HMS*, the characters have very different lives, expectations, and problems. The young characters seem to be learning gender role expectations from the generation before them, but at the same time, Esperanza is forging a new path for herself. How were current expectations in terms of gender roles, similar or different when your parents were children? –How about when your grandparents were growing up?

- Questions- Brainstorm 1-5 questions that will help you understand how gender roles in your family have changed over time, if at all.

Interviews- Interview your parents and/or family member from your parents generation/age.

Additional activity – discuss how gender identity, gender expression, and gender roles have changed throughout the time.

- **Quotation Station:** Choose several quotations from the play that capture various themes from *HMS* (There are several in the margins of this study guide.) and have students interact with them in one or more of the following ways:

- Analyze what the deeper meanings are within the quotation;
- Make a predication about the story based on the quotation;
- Use the quotation as a story starter and continue the story;
- Brainstorm everything the quotation makes you think of.

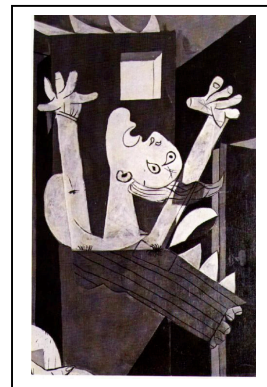
*"In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting."*



- **Image Theatre:** Choose a theme from *The House on Mango Street* and brainstorm with the class a list of words, ideas, emotions, memories, headlines, etc. that they associate with that concept. Use these words as prompts for individual and group tableaux. Invite the group to reflect on what they see in the tableaux and record these reflections, offering them to the group as inspiration and content for individual or group poems, scenes, short stories, essays, etc.
- **Found Poetry:** Choose a theme or a feeling and write down or cut out words and phrases (from the play or novel) related to that theme or feeling. Rearrange the words to create a poem of your own.
- **Literature Circles:** In small groups, agree to read a specific set of pages and then meet to discuss the section. Have everyone come up with two clarification questions and two discussion questions to ask at the literature circle. During each meeting, identify what themes, symbols and motifs were present in the assigned reading. Discuss their significance.
- **Character-based debates:** This is a fun way to combine theatre with social studies topics. Choose a theme from the play and assign each student a character from the play who is ideologically connected to that theme. Students analyze that character's perspective in preparation for a debate or panel discussion on the topic. Some students can play characters while others play moderators or reporters who ask the questions.

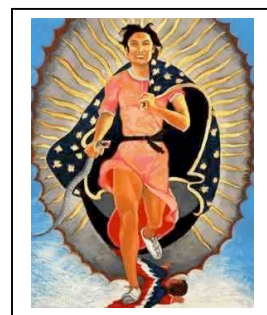
**Additional Topics to Explore**  
through research, writing, and/or discussion:

- **Inner City Barrios:** The word *barrio* is Spanish for neighborhood and often refers to a working class neighborhood similar to a ghetto. Research the inner city of Chicago. How has the ethnic diversity changed over time? What conflicts have emerged over housing and gentrification of Chicago's barrios? What is the significance of home ownership among working class families?
- **Sex and Violence:** Through Esperanza's experiences in *The House on Mango Street*, the reader/viewer is introduced to the harsh reality of sex and sadly violence. What other works of literature expose issues of violence against women? What messages do young people these days receive about sex and violence through music, television and movies?
- **Chicana Feminism:** In the mainstream, people tend to be familiar with a brand of feminism put forth mostly by white women. Women of color, however, have asserted alternative ideas about women's liberation. Research Chicana feminism, drawing upon books such as, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*. By Sonia Saldívar-Hull and *The Bridge called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* by Gloria Anzaldúa. What do Chicana feminists say about women's liberation? How does Sandra Cisneros use literature to assert her own ideas about growing up female in a male dominated world?



*Falling Woman*  
by Picasso

*"The House on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there is a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom."*



*Self-portrait as la Virgen de Guadalupe*  
Yolanda López

## IV. After the Play

### A. General- After seeing the play, *The House on Mango Street*, reflect:

1. What stands out in your mind as you think about the play?
2. Do you believe the playwright intended us to walk away with a particular message or idea? If so, what do you think are the main messages?
3. How does this play impact its audience? What are we left with at the end of the play?
4. What questions does this play spark for you?
5. In-depth: Write a review of the play, focusing on acting, style, genre, design, and theme.

### B. Characters- Reflect on how the characters change over the course of the play:

1. Name three ways Esperanza changes over the course of the play and include details about the events that cause her to change.
2. What role does writing play in Esperanza's life?
3. Discuss the role of parents in the novel. How can Esperanza's relationship with her parents be characterized? In what ways is it different or similar to other characters' parent/child relationships in the novel?
4. In-depth: Write an essay and/or create a chart analyzing Esperanza as a character. Use the main themes from *The House on Mango Street* to create your outline, and describe the various aspects of Esperanza's life.

### C. Style/Genre- *The House on Mango Street* as presented by Teatro Visión is a Chicana play based on a narrative vignette novel. These questions relate to this specific genre:

1. One writing strategy that the playwright, Amy Ludwig, employed when she transformed the novel into a play, was to divide the narrator voice between a young Esperanza and an older Esperanza.



Sandra Cisneros

What effect does this technique have on the story?

2. Much of the narrative from the novel is divided up between various characters in the play, breaking up sentences and paragraphs to create a dynamic rhythm. Write an analysis of this technique in the production. How effective was the use of language and rhythm? What effect did it have on the story and on the performance?
3. What role does music play in the production? What effect did the songs used in the play create?
4. What is significant about seeing the lives of a Chicana (Mexican-American) family in Chicago played out on stage in San José, CA?
5. Why do you think Cisneros and the playwright choose not to try to represent dialect, slang, or accents?
6. In-depth: Take one of the narrative vignettes you have written and turn it into a short scene. Try dividing up the narrative among various characters in the story to create a dynamic rhythm with the lines. Choose a few classmates to read your piece aloud. Get feedback from the class and make any necessary adjustments.

# Study Guide: *The House on Mango Street* Student Page

## D. Major Themes- Reflect on the big ideas that unfold in *The House on Mango Street*:

1. What role does **death** play in *The House on Mango Street*? How do the many deaths in the novel relate to one another, and how do they influence Esperanza?
2. What role does **magic or the supernatural** play in *The House on Mango Street*? How does it affect and influence Esperanza?
3. In what ways does **writing** set Esperanza apart from her neighborhood? In what ways does it help her integrate into her neighborhood?
4. How do **race and gender** come into conflict in *The House on Mango Street*? Does one triumph as the more important concern, or do both issues receive equal consideration?
5. What does the house on Mango Street represent to Esperanza and to her family? What is the significance of **home**? What does Esperanza seem to learn about "home" over the course of the play?



6. *The House on Mango Street* is a 'coming of age' story, meaning that it is about **growing up**, leaving childhood behind. What events in the play contribute to Esperanza's 'coming of age'?
7. As Esperanza is growing up, she is more and more aware of issues regarding economic class and ethnic prejudice. How is this illustrated in the play?
8. How are **sex and violence** linked in *The House on Mango Street*? Why does Esperanza both seek and try to avoid sexual experiences?
9. How does Esperanza assert her own **identity**?

"They think we are dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives."

## E. Connections- Identify literary connections between *The House on Mango Street* and other works:

1. **Women of Color:** *Young Cornrows Callin' Out the Moon* by Ruth Forman- Compare and contrast Foreman's and Cisneros' writings about childhood. Focus on content and on style. How does each writer's environment affect her writing?
2. **Chicana Literature:** Quintana, Alvina E., *Home Girls: Chicana Literary Voices*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. Write an essay analyzing *The House on Mango Street* based on the main points put forth in this book about Chicana Literature.
3. **Coming of Age:** James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Like the hero of that novel, Stephen Dedalus, Esperanza has a keen eye for observation and is gifted in her use of language. Write a compare and contrast essay on these two works of literature. What do the similarities reveal about humanity in general? What do the differences reveal about how one's environment influences one's ideas of self?
4. **A Place of Her Own:** Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a long essay in which Woolf asserts that women need a place and financial resources of their own in order to write successfully. In what ways are Woolf and Cisneros making similar assertions? How are the two author's strikingly different backgrounds made evident in the differences between these two pieces of writing?

### Theater/Performing Arts, 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades

**Address:**

PO Box 28367  
San José, CA 95159-8367

**Phone:**

408.294.6621

**E-Mail:**

Teatro@TeatroVision.org.

We're on the  
Web:

[www.teatrovision.org](http://www.teatrovision.org)

Celebrating culture.

Nurturing community.

Inspiring vision.

#### 1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

##### **Processing, Analyzing, and Responding to Sensory Information Through the Language and Skills Unique to Theater**

Students observe their environment and respond, using the elements of theater. They also observe formal and informal works of theater, film/video, and electronic media and respond, using the vocabulary of theater.

###### *Development of the Vocabulary of Theater*

1.1 Use the vocabulary of theater, such as *acting values, style, genre, design, and theme*, to describe theatrical experiences.

###### *Comprehension and Analysis of the Elements of Theater*

1.2 Document observations and perceptions of production elements, noting mood, pacing, and use of space through class discussion and reflective writing.

#### 2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

##### **Creating, Performing, and Participating in Theater**

**Students apply processes and skills in acting, directing, designing, and scriptwriting to create formal and informal theater, film/videos, and electronic media productions and to perform in them.**

###### *Development of Theatrical Skills*

2.1 Make acting choices, using script analysis, character research, reflection, and revision through the rehearsal process.

###### *Creation/Invention in Theater*

2.2 Write dialogues and scenes, applying basic dramatic structure: exposition, complication, conflict, crises, climax, and resolution.

2.3 Design, produce, or perform scenes or plays from a variety of theatrical periods and styles, including Shakespearean and contemporary realism.

#### 3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

##### **Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of Theater**

Students analyze the role and development of theater, film/video, and electronic media in past and present cultures throughout the world, noting diversity as it relates to theater.

###### *Role and Cultural Significance of Theater*

3.1 Identify and compare how film, theater, television, and electronic media productions influence values and behaviors.

3.2 Describe the ways in which playwrights reflect and influence their culture in such works as *Raisin in the Sun*, *Antigone*, and the *Mahabharata*.

#### 4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

##### **Responding to, Analyzing, and Critiquing Theatrical Experiences**

Students critique and derive meaning from works of theater, film/video, electronic media, and theatrical artists on the basis of aesthetic qualities.

###### *Critical Assessment of Theater*

4.1 Compare a traditional interpretation of a play with a nontraditional interpretation and defend the merits of the different interpretations.

###### *Derivation of Meaning from Works of Theater*

4.2 Report on how a specific actor used drama to convey meaning in his or her performances.