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### **Article #1: *The House on Mango Street***

**About the Author: Sandra Cisneros (1954 - )**

Sandra Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, in Chicago, Illinois. She is the third of seven children and the only daughter, so she sometimes felt left out in her brothers' company. Her father, a Mexican immigrant, worked as an upholsterer and frequently talked about his sons, but not as often about Sandra. Her mother worked in a local factory and completed most chores around the house so Sandra could focus on her schoolwork because she felt an education was very important to her daughter's future.

Señor Cisneros's family still lived in Mexico City, so the entire family made an annual trip to spend quality time with their extended family. Each time they returned to Chicago, the Cisneroses unpacked their belongings into a new apartment, and the children enrolled in a different school. Consequently, Sandra Cisneros had trouble making friends and feeling like she belonged. She found reading, especially reading fairy tales, an excellent way to escape her lonely childhood, and she was thankful that it was possible to do so, even in a poor family, with the library card her mother helped her obtain.

In 1966, the family finally moved into a house of their own, which helped the children to stay in one school. When she began high school at Josephinum Academy, an all-girls Catholic school near her house, Cisneros found another place where she felt she belonged. Her classmates and one particular teacher acknowledged her writing talent—especially poetry writing—and encouraged her to continue.

During her college years, first at Loyola University in Chicago and then in the Master's Program at the University of Iowa, Cisneros found her unique writing voice. At first, she looked around her classes and observed the faculty, realizing that she was very different because she was a woman from a poor neighborhood with a personal identity that was part American and part Mexican. Eventually she discovered that she could pull experiences from her own life, especially the people and places from the neighborhoods of her childhood, to write poems and stories that were both important and interesting.

At first, Cisneros could not make enough money as a full-time writer to pay her bills, so she took a job as a counselor for high school dropouts at Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago in 1978. During the day, she helped the students deal with their personal and academic troubles while encouraging them to focus on their goals.

In the evenings, Cisneros gave public readings of her writing and worked on a small chapbook of her poetry, entitled *Bad Boys*, which was published in 1980 as a limited run. Also that year, she left the high school to take a job as a recruiter at her alma mater, Loyola University, in an effort to encourage more Latino students to attend college. While in both school environments, she continued to meet interesting people and collect their stories, which served as more inspiration for the writing she did in her free time.

In 1982, Cisneros got her first big break: the National Endowment for the Arts awarded her a

grant, which allowed her to quit her job and focus only on her writing for a while. She finally had time to put all her short writing pieces together, and the concept for her most famous publication emerged. To get some distance from her home and the people she was writing about, she left the United States to travel around Europe while she revised her little stories, called vignettes. During this time, she also wrote more poems and built friendships with people overseas. These friendships reminded her of how similar all people are, despite their many differences. She returned to the United States in 1984 for the publication of *The House on Mango Street*, which received so much critical praise for its new style and fresh voice that it won the Before Columbus American Book Award.

Shortly thereafter, Cisneros moved to San Antonio to work with the Guadalupe Arts Center. She immediately found a community in San Antonio that made her feel welcome and comfortable in a way she never felt in Chicago. San Antonio has been her home since. After *The House on Mango Street* was published, she was also better able to earn money and secure awards and grants that allowed her to focus on her writing.

In 1987, she published a book of poems, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, which further cemented her reputation as a gifted writer and may have been the catalyst for Random House to offer her \$100,000 for another book of fiction—the largest advance ever offered a Latino writer at that time. Cisneros used the advance to write and revise a collection of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, which was published in 1991. Her second book of poetry, *Loose Woman*, was published in 1994, and an epic novel entitled *Carmelo* was published in 2002.

When Cisneros was a child, there were no Mexican writers that served as role models to her. As a young Mexican-American girl, most people expected Sandra to grow up strong, get married, have children, and take care of the home. She has never gotten married or had children because she says she needs the quiet of her home to write, and her books and poems are like her children. Instead Cisneros made a place in the world for herself, where a young Latina can be creative, thoughtful, and intelligent while also being happy and successful. Although she did not have suitable role models for her writing, as a best-selling author and possibly the most famous Mexican woman writer, Cisneros has become a role model for young writers, especially women, who are inspired by her dedication and talent. She has also been able to use her writing as a means of educating non-Spanish speakers about the Latino experience in America, thereby increasing our understanding of the basic human themes of identity, belonging, and home.

Possible questions for tomorrow's class discussion and for the final test:

1. What is one of the problems Sandra Cisneros faced in her youth? How did she overcome it?
2. What is one life lesson you can learn from Sandra Cisneros's life? Where do you see that lesson exemplified in her life?
3. Based on the information offered in the article, what do you think Sandra Cisneros is like? Give three traits and evidence from the article to support your opinions.

## **Article #2 *The House on Mango Street* Summary**

novella: a literary genre of written fiction. We can broadly say that a **novella** is shorter than a full-length novel but longer than a short story.

vignette: a short scene that captures a single moment or a defining detail about a character, idea, or other element of the story. Vignettes are mostly descriptive; in fact, they often include little or no plot detail. They are not stand-alone literary works, nor are they complete plots or narratives. Instead, vignettes are small parts of a larger work, and can only exist as pieces of a whole story.

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The novella *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros features a series of short vignettes told from the first-person point of view of Esperanza, a young teenage girl who is the narrator. Esperanza moves to the house on Mango Street in Chicago with her family, but she doesn't like it. The house is run-down and small in a poor neighborhood. Esperanza tracks her experiences over a year of living in that house. Not an attractive girl, Esperanza never receives the attention from men that some of her friends receive. She describes time spent with her sister, Nenny, such as when they paraded around the neighborhood in high heels one day with their friends Rachel and Lucy. She also follows the lives of many of the neighbors who live around her. She highlights significant or telling moments in their lives, mostly moments that show the difficulties that they experience, such as when Louie's cousin was arrested for stealing a car or when Esperanza's Aunt Lupe dies.

She tells about a neighbor Marin, who is a young mother trying to raise her children. Marin dates a man named Geraldo who winds up dead the same night. Esperanza describes Sally, a girl from school, whose father physically abuses her, so she ends up marrying an older man and moving away. Several times in the story Esperanza describes situations where abuse occurs.

Esperanza points out people who are disappointed with the way their lives turned out, such as her mother who dropped out of school because she was ashamed of her wardrobe. Esperanza longs to own her own home, a spacious place where she could let other people stay with her. She meets some fortune-telling women who promise her that her dream will someday come true. They remind her, however, that she should not turn her back on Mango Street. She should return to help those people who are unable to help themselves get out. By the end of the story, after a year of living on Mango Street, Esperanza realizes that she will escape someday, but she will also return. If she doesn't help make things better, who will?

## **Article #3: *The House on Mango Street* Historical Context: The Mexican Population in Chicago**

According to the 2010 census, two-thirds of the United States' Latino population lives in California, Texas, or Arizona. However, the fourth most populous state for Latinos, especially Mexicans, is Illinois. In 1850, the Mexican population of Chicago consisted of a mere 50 people. By 1920, the census reported 1,200 Mexicans living in Chicago, and there were over one million by the year 2000. Today, many Mexican-Americans living in Chicago can trace their family's history in the city as far back as the turn of the previous century.

The period between 1900 and 1925 was full of change for both Mexico and the United States. Mexico was experiencing a time of political unrest and war, so men looking for

better wages crossed the American border. In addition, many people found it unsafe to stay in Mexico, so entire families fled the country for the political or religious safety and the freedoms the United States offered.

At this time, Chicago's economy was heavily reliant on the railroad, steel, sugar beet, and meatpacking industries, but more workers were needed, sometimes to replace employees on strike or men fighting overseas during World War I. Business leaders sent representatives to the Southwest to hire newly arrived Mexican immigrants and transport them north. The recruiters, called *enganchistas*, paid for the new workers' railroad fees and meals on the trip to Chicago, with the understanding that the Mexicans' first paychecks would be docked a percentage until the money was compensated.

They had better-paying jobs in the United States, but Mexicans still struggled. Many worked ten or more hours per shift, and their meals consisted of small portions of bread or watered-down stew, if they ate anything at all. Mexican immigrants had difficulty finding reasonably priced housing because many apartment complexes were owned by Europeans who resented immigrants. Therefore, landlords unfairly raised rent prices for Mexicans, which meant many people lived in the same apartment to be able to afford a roof over their heads. With more people in such small spaces, good health and sanitation was difficult to maintain. By the early 1920s, American soldiers had returned from war and wanted Mexicans to vacate their jobs and their communities.

In Chicago, neighborhoods called *colonias*, or enclaves, were informally established to help keep Mexicans together. Some of those areas included Calumet, on the near West Side of Chicago; the Back of the Yards area, near the stockyards; and Pilsen, on the lower West Side. These enclaves gave rise to tortilla factories, restaurants, markets, and Spanish-language newspapers like *El Ideal*. The 1930 census reports 20,000 Mexicans, both immigrants and American citizens, living in Chicago—an increase of six hundred percent in just ten years.

When the Great Depression hit the United States, Mexicans were seen as expendable and undesirable, so a nationwide campaign of repatriation began. Mexicans were rounded up and sent back to Mexico, even those who were born in the United States and were American citizens. Those who remained in the country had an even harder time getting jobs and food for their families, and some were hurt or killed because of racial violence. At the end of the campaign, about one-third of the Mexican population in the United States had been forced out.

In Chicago, the loss was not as severe, in part because of the involvement of social workers and the work of settlement houses' staff, who had already been offering assistance to immigrants for decades. By the late 1930s, Mexicans in Chicago began to take action to protect themselves and each other from the difficulties around them. Mutual aid societies were established in the enclaves, which required members to put a portion of their earnings into a community collection box each month. When a member needed money for a serious problem, like unemployment, illness, or death, they were given a portion of the money in the community savings to alleviate the issue.

In addition, Mexicans, especially steel workers, joined labor unions like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to win better wages and working conditions and to fight racism

they observed in the workplace. In 1940, there were 35,000 Mexicans living in or around Chicago, but that was about to change. When Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941, Mexicans living in the United States joined the military to fight with the Allied forces in World War II. Some illegal immigrants were able to earn their citizenship this way, including Sandra Cisneros's father.

However, there were once again thousands of jobs needing to be filled, so the United States government established the Bracero Program (brazo means arm in Spanish) to invite guest workers from Mexico into the United States. These men were each on a six-month employment contract to work in agriculture in the Southwest and the railroad industry in Chicago and other major cities. The program ran until 1964.

In the meantime, the Mexican-American community in Chicago continued to expand. Some braceros did not return to Mexico when their contracts were up, and they illegally stayed in the country with friends or relatives, taking jobs where they could. Colonias spread to larger areas, and an area near Pilsen called Little Village, or La Villita, became the center of Mexican culture in Chicago and remains so today. Mexican families also moved out of the city to the suburbs, including Joliet and Aurora, to find more space and larger homes. From the 1950s to the 1970s, organizations like the Mexican Patriotic Committee, the Chicago Area Project, and a branch of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) formed to meet the community, educational, and civil rights needs of the 250,000 Mexican citizens living in the Chicago area in 1970, a number that had increased five hundred percent since 1950.

In the 1970s, the Chicano movement encouraged strength and pride in the Mexican culture in Chicago. Muralists such as Mario Castillo painted reminders of their heritage—from Aztec and Mayan symbols to entertainers, political leaders, and personal family members—as a way to pay homage to their roots. Mexican-Americans also worked in community organizations like the Spanish Coalition for Jobs and the Latino Institute to get the housing, medical coverage, and education they needed for their families. Through these organizations, they were also able to fight unfair employment practices and racial discrimination in the workplace.

Today, Chicago remains a city where the Mexican culture is showcased and Mexican-Americans feel more empowered. Community service and activist groups work to educate Mexican-Americans on the resources and issues that pertain to them, while smaller pride organizations stage citywide celebrations, like the Mexican Independence Day Parade down 26th Street every September. Chicago's National Museum of Mexican Art, opened in 1987, has become a major institute for Mexican art and is visited by over 200,000 people annually. Mexican-Americans have earned top offices in local, state, and federal government as representatives of Chicago, and the state of Illinois, and they serve the more than one million Mexican-Americans living in the metropolitan area as of 2010. It is clear that without Mexicans' contributions to the city's industries, community, and culture for over a century, Chicago would not be what it is today.

Possible questions for tomorrow's class discussion and for the final test:

1. What are three reasons that Mexicans moved to the United States between 1900 and 1950?

- Describe several ways that the social workers, settlement houses, or activism organizations helped Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans in Chicago.
- Why is it logical that two-thirds of the Mexican-American population in the United States live in Texas, California, and Arizona.

**The House on Mango Street Characters' Connections with One Another:**

