
THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

Sandra Cisneros

The House on Mango Street is a book written in episodic form, consisting of a series of short stories and sketches. What links all of the episodes is the voice of the narrator—Esperanza—who, appropriately, opens her story with a reflection on

her name. You might read these sketches as if they were a series of journal entries written by a young girl who is very skillful at revealing the secrets of her own character.

My Name

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window all her life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the

syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena, which is uglier than mine. Magdalena, who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

A Rice Sandwich

The special kids, the ones who wear keys around their necks, get to eat in the canteen. The canteen! Even the name sounds important. And these kids at lunch time go there because their mothers aren't home or home is too far away to get to.

My home isn't far but it's not close either, and somehow I got it in my head one day to ask my mother to make me a sandwich and write a note to the principal so I could eat in the canteen too.

Oh no, she says pointing the butter knife at me as if I'm starting trouble, no sir. Next thing you know everybody will be wanting a bag lunch—I'll be up all night cutting bread into little triangles, this one with mayonnaise, this one with mustard,

no pickles on mine, but mustard on one side please. You kids just like to invent more work for me.

But Nenny says she doesn't want to eat at school—ever—because she likes to go home with her best friend Gloria who lives across the schoolyard. Gloria's mama has a big color T.V. and all they do is watch cartoons. Kiki and Carlos, on the other hand, are patrol boys. They don't want to eat at school either. They like to stand out in the cold especially if it's raining. They think suffering is good for you ever since they saw that movie *300 Spartans*.

I'm no Spartan and hold up an anemic wrist to prove it. I can't even blow up a balloon without getting dizzy. And besides, I know how to make my own lunch. If I ate at school there'd be less dishes to wash. You would see me less and less and like me better. Everyday at noon my chair would be empty. Where is my favorite daughter, you would cry, and when I came home finally at three p.m. you would appreciate me.

Okay, okay, my mother says after three days of this. And the following morning I get to go to school with my mother's letter and a rice sandwich because we don't have lunch meat.

Mondays or Fridays, it doesn't matter, mornings always go by slow and this day especially. But lunch time came finally and I got to get in line with the stay-at-school kids. Everything is fine until the nun who knows all the canteen kids by heart looks at me and says: you, who sent you here? And since I am shy, I don't say anything, just hold out my hand with the letter. This is no good, she says, till Sister Superior gives the okay. Go upstairs and see her. And so I went.

I had to wait for two kids in front of me to get hollered at, one because he did something in class, the other because he didn't. My turn came and I stood in front of the big desk with holy pictures under the glass while the Sister Superior read my letter. It went like this:

Dear Sister Superior, Please let Esperanza eat in the lunch room because she lives too far away and she gets tired. As you can see she is very skinny. I hope to God she does not faint. Thanking you, Mrs. E. Cordero.

You don't live far, she says. You live across the boulevard. That's only four blocks. Not even. Three maybe. Three long blocks away from here. I bet I can see your house from my window. Which one? Come here. Which one is your house?

And then she made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? she said pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry. I always cry when nuns yell at me, even if they're not yelling.

Then she was sorry and said I could stay—just for today, not tomorrow or the day after—you go home. And I said yes and could I please have a Kleenex—I had to blow my nose.

In the canteen, which was nothing special, lots of boys and girls watched while I cried and ate my sandwich, the bread already greasy and the rice cold.

Chanclas¹

It's me—Mama, Mama said. I open up and she's there with bags and big boxes, the new clothes and, yes, she's got the socks and a new slip with a little rose on it and a pink and white striped dress. What about the shoes? I forgot. Too late now. I'm tired. Whew!

Six-thirty already and my little cousin's baptism is over. All day waiting, the door locked, don't open up for nobody, and I don't 'til Mama gets back and buys everything except the shoes.

Now Uncle Nacho is coming in his car and we have to hurry to get to Precious Blood Church quick because that's where the baptism party is, in the basement rented for today for dancing and tamales and everyone's kids running all over the place.

Mama dances, laughs, dances. All of a sudden Mama is sick. I fan her hot face with a paper plate. Too many tamales, but Uncle Nacho says too many this and tilts his thumb to his lips.

Everybody is laughing except me because I'm wearing the new dress, pink and white, with stripes and new underclothes and the new socks

1. Chanclas: shoes.

and the old saddle shoes I wear to school, brown and white, the kind I get every September because they last long and they do. My feet are scuffed and round and the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress, so I just sit.

Meanwhile that boy who is my cousin by first communion or something, asks me to dance and I can't. Just stuff my feet under the metal folding chair stamped Precious Blood and pick on a wad of brown gum that's stuck beneath the seat. I shake my head no. My feet grow bigger and bigger.

Then Uncle Nacho is pulling and pulling my arm and it doesn't matter how new the dress Mama bought is because my feet are ugly until my uncle who is a liar says you are the prettiest girl here, will you dance, but I believe him and, yes, we are dancing, my Uncle Nacho and me, only I don't want to at first. My feet swell big and heavy like plungers, but I drag them across the linoleum floor straight center where Uncle wants to show off the new dance we learned. And Uncle spins me and my skinny arms bend the way he taught me and my mother watches and my little cousins watch and the boy who is my cousin by first communion watches and everyone says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until I forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes, brown and white, the kind my mother buys each year for school.

And all I hear is the clapping when the music stops. My uncle and me bow and he walks me back in my thick shoes to my mother who is proud to be my mother. All night the boy who is a man watches me dance. He watched me dance.

Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes

I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I tell them after the mailman says here's your mail. Here's your mail he said.

I make a story for my life, for each step my brown shoe takes. I say, "And so she trudged up the wooden stairs, her sad brown shoes taking her to the house she never liked."

I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong.

We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.

I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free.

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away.

Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?

They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out.

Responding to the Stories

Analyzing the Stories

Identifying Facts

1. In "My Name," what private thoughts about her name does the narrator share with the reader?
2. Explain why, in "A Rice Sandwich," Esperanza

wants to eat her lunch at school. How does she convince her mother to let her?

3. In "Chanclas," what is Esperanza's conflict?

Interpreting Meanings

4. On page 54, what does Esperanza mean when she says she doesn't want to inherit her great-

grandmother's place by the window? Based on what you have seen of Esperanza, do you think she ever will?

5. What does the name Esperanza chooses for herself reveal about her **character**?
6. What changes does Esperanza undergo in "A Rice Sandwich" and "Chanclas"? What does she learn about the world and about herself?
7. What is the significance of the title of the last sketch? What do you think Mango Street represents for Esperanza, and why does she believe she will have to leave it someday?
8. Explain what Esperanza means when she says she has "gone away to come back" (page 57). What is her purpose in writing, according to the last two phrases of this sketch?
9. Given all that she has revealed about herself, how would you **characterize** Esperanza? Describe at least four character traits, and then identify three details from these sketches that you think are most significant in revealing what she is really like.
10. Did you find touches of humor in Esperanza's story? What passages might make a reader smile? How would you describe the way the adult writer feels about her "persona"?

Writing About the Stories

A Creative Response

Imitating the Writer's Technique. These little episodes might be called "vignettes." A **vignette** is a very short literary sketch, often one that is suggestive and poetic in style. Imitate Cisneros's first vignette here, and write one of your own about a name—your name or the name of another character. You might open with Cisneros's first line. Be sure to tell what your narrator thinks the name means, what color it feels like, and what music it sounds like. End your vignette with the name your character would prefer to be known by.

Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

Figures of Speech

These vignettes have a poetic feel to them, in part because Cisneros uses **figures of speech**—imagina-

tive phrasings in which one thing is usually compared to something much different from it. Figurative language is an economical way of expressing ourselves—explaining a figure of speech usually takes far more words than the figure of speech itself contains.

1. What does Cisneros mean in the first story when she describes women who "sit their sadness on an elbow"? What visual **image** is suggested by this figure of speech?
2. Find the figures of speech that describe Esperanza's name. What **feelings** about the sounds of Spanish and English is Cisneros expressing here?
3. What figures of speech describe Esperanza's feet at the dance? Do these suggest positive or negative feelings, and why? Suppose she had gotten the shoes she wanted. What figure of speech might she have used to describe her feet in them?
4. Find the passage that **personifies** Mango Street—that talks of Mango Street as if it had the feelings and body of a person. What is the emotional impact of this way of describing a street?

Reading About the Writer

Sandra Cisneros (1954—) spent her childhood moving back and forth between Chicago, where she was born, and Mexico City, where her parents were from. She graduated from the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, has won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and is a prize-winning poet. Of her writing, Cisneros says: "There are so few of us writing about the powerless, and that world, the world of thousands of silent women, women like my mama . . . , must be recorded so that their stories can finally be heard."

The poet Gwendolyn Brooks (see page 314) has called Cisneros "one of the most brilliant of today's young writers." One critic has written that the stories in her most recent collection, *Woman Hollering Creek*, "invite us into the souls of characters as unforgettable as a first kiss." Cisneros currently lives in San Antonio, Texas.