

The House on Mango Street



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SANDRA CISNEROS

Sandra Cisneros was the only daughter in a family of six boys, and her family moved frequently between Chicago and Mexico City as her father took different jobs. Cisneros's mother was her strongest positive female influence, as she encouraged Sandra to read and continue her education. Cisneros began writing poems at age ten, and she later attended Loyola College and then the Iowa Writers' Workshop. At Iowa she began writing about her own unique experiences instead of trying to imitate the primarily white male voices of the traditional literary canon. Cisneros is best known for *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. She has become a leading figure of the Chicano literary movement, and has taught at several high schools and colleges. She currently lives and writes in San Antonio, Texas.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cisneros's work has become a landmark for American minority women writers, and she is one of the most famous Chicana and Latina writers. *The House on Mango Street* is set in a barrio (primarily Latino neighborhood) of Chicago, and portrays both the poverty and the male-dominated culture of Cisneros's own upbringing. Her work criticizes both the sexism of the Mexican-American barrio and the racism and classism (and sexism) of English-American culture, and has become an important part of the increasing dialogue surrounding these issues.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The House on Mango Street is part of the Chicano and Latino literary movement, which includes authors like Rudolfo Anaya, the author of *Bless Me, Ultima*. *The House on Mango Street* has also been compared to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which also deals with women finding their own independent space (both literally and figuratively) in which to write.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The House on Mango Street*
- **When Written:** 1980-1984
- **Where Written:** Chicago, Illinois
- **When Published:** 1984
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Chicana literature
- **Genre:** Short story sequence, *bildungsroman*
- **Setting:** Chicago, Illinois

- **Climax:** Esperanza's rape
- **Antagonist:** Abusive men, prejudice
- **Point of View:** First person limited, from Esperanza's point of view

EXTRA CREDIT

A House of Her Own. Cisneros, like Esperanza, dreamed as a child of having her own house, and she was able to achieve this dream through her literary successes. But the house she now owns in San Antonio, Texas has caused some controversy because of its bright purple color, which Cisneros chose herself. Some people argue that the color doesn't fit with its historical neighborhood, while others support it as a statement of Mexican culture and Cisneros's own creativity.

Ideas. Cisneros has written that for some of the stories in *The House on Mango Street* – like “The Family of Little Feet” – she started with a title and then had to make a story for it, while the first line of “The Three Sisters” came to her in a dream.



PLOT SUMMARY

The House on Mango Street is a *bildungsroman* (coming-of-age story) of a young Chicana (Mexican-American) girl named Esperanza Cordero. The book is told in small vignettes which act as both chapters of a novel and independent short stories or prose poems. The story encompasses a year in Esperanza's life, as she moves to a house on Mango Street in a barrio (Latino neighborhood) of Chicago, Illinois. The house on Mango Street is an improvement over Esperanza's previous residences, but it is still not the house she or her family dreams of, and throughout the book Esperanza feels that she doesn't belong there.

Over the course of the year Esperanza grows emotionally, artistically, and sexually, and the novel meanders through her experiences with her neighbors and classmates. Esperanza makes friends with two other Chicana girls of Mango Street, Rachel and Lucy. These three, along with Esperanza's little sister Nenny, have many small adventures in the first part of the book, including searching through a labyrinthine junk store and learning from an older girl named Marin. While exploring her world, Esperanza experiences the shame of poverty, the unfairness of racism, and the beauty of poetry and music.

Along with chronicling Esperanza's growth, the book's vignettes also move through brief descriptions of her neighbors. While some of these portraits involve eccentric or memorable men (Meme Ortiz, Geraldo, or Earl), most of them

involve women who are trapped in some way. There is Mamacita, who does not leave her apartment because she is afraid of the English language, and Rafaela, whose husband keeps her locked up because she is beautiful. Alicia must stay up all night studying so she can graduate from college and get a good job someday, but her father makes her wake up early to make tortillas and do the chores. Rosa Vargas is imprisoned by the impossible task of taking care of her many unruly children. There is also Minerva, who writes poems like Esperanza, but is already married with two children and a husband who beats her.

Esperanza goes through puberty and matures sexually during the book, beginning with an adventure walking around in high-heeled **shoes** with the other neighborhood girls. Most of Esperanza's female neighbors are abused or oppressed by their fathers and husbands, so Esperanza knows she wants to escape such a male-dominated society, but at the same time she must deal with her own emerging sexuality and her desire to be loved by men. She decides that she wants to be "beautiful and cruel" like a woman in the movies, one who is attractive to men but also retains all her own power. Esperanza befriends a girl named Sally, who is beautiful and more sexually mature than the other girls, but has an abusive father. Esperanza experiences a "loss of innocence" moment in the neighborhood "**monkey garden**" when a group of boys steals Sally's keys and makes her kiss all of them to get the keys back. Esperanza's friendship with Sally also leads to her most traumatic experience of the novel, as Sally leaves her alone at a carnival and Esperanza is raped.

These experiences of male oppression, Esperanza's growing creativity and desire to write, and her dream of a house of her own all cause Esperanza to want to escape Mango Street. At a neighbor's funeral, **three old sisters** seem to read Esperanza's mind and predict that she will leave Mango Street someday, but that she must not forget where she came from or the women still stuck there. By the end of the book, Esperanza is still in the same house, but she has matured and is confident that she is too strong to be trapped there forever. Her writing and storytelling lets her escape Mango Street emotionally, but it will also let her escape physically later through education and financial independence. And when she does leave, Esperanza vows to return for those who are not strong enough to escape on their own.

protective of Sally, but Sally is not a good friend to Esperanza.

Marin – An older Puerto Rican girl who lives with her cousins on Mango Street. Marin sells Avon makeup and spends most of her days baby-sitting, and so cannot leave the house. She dreams of both marrying her boyfriend in Puerto Rico and being swept away by a rich man in Chicago.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Esperanza Cordero – The protagonist and narrator of the novel, a young Chicana (Mexican-American) teenager whose name means "hope" in Spanish. The book follows a year of her life in a barrio (Latino neighborhood) of Chicago, during which she both experiences traumatic events and matures sexually, emotionally, and artistically.

Mama – Esperanza's mother, one of the strongest women of the novel but rarely present in the plot. She is often a comfort to Esperanza, but she regrets dropping out of school and never "making something" of her life.

Papa – Esperanza's father who works a lot and is rarely around. A benign presence compared to most of the abusive father figures in the book.

Magdalena "Nenny" Cordero – Esperanza's little sister, who Esperanza must be constantly responsible for. Nenny is often lost in her own dream world, and sometimes her immaturity makes Esperanza embarrassed in front of her friends.

Lucy – One of Esperanza's best friends. Lucy was born in Texas and is the older of two Chicana sisters. They live across the street from Esperanza and share in many of her early adventures.

Rachel – Lucy's younger sister and Esperanza's other best friend. Rachel was born in Chicago.

Alicia – A young woman who attends university to try and change her life for the better. Her father makes her wake up early and do chores because he sees that as proper woman's work, however, so Alicia must stay up late at night to study.

Minerva – A young woman who is similar in age to Esperanza, but already married with two children and an abusive husband. Minerva writes poems and she and Esperanza share their writing with each other.

Cathy – An Anglo-American girl who is Esperanza's first friend on Mango Street. Her family moves away when Esperanza's family moves in because the neighborhood is "getting bad."

Carlos Cordero – One of Esperanza's brothers. Carlos rarely appears, and Esperanza acknowledges that her brothers live in a separate world of boys.

Kiki Cordero – Esperanza's other brother, who also rarely appears.

Aunt Lupe – Esperanza's aunt, who was once a strong and beautiful swimmer, but has been sick and bed-ridden all of



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sally – A girl Esperanza befriends as she starts to get older. Sally is more sexually mature and seems beautiful and glamorous to Esperanza. She has an abusive father and lets herself be taken advantage of by boys. Esperanza feels very

Esperanza's life. Esperanza reads Lupe her poems and Lupe encourages her to keep writing.

Angel Vargas – One of the many unruly, fatherless Vargas children. Angel falls from a great height and dies.

Rosa Vargas – A neighborhood woman whose husband abandoned her and their many wild children. She is overwhelmed by the children and has no control over their dangerous antics.

Ruthie – An adult neighbor who still acts like a child and plays with Esperanza and her friends.

The Three Sisters – Three old aunts related to Rachel and Lucy, who appear for a funeral and predict Esperanza's future. Esperanza thinks they are magical, and they do seem to symbolize the Three Fates of mythology.

Sire – Esperanza's first real crush, a neighborhood boy who stares at her. Sire has a girlfriend named Lois, and Esperanza watches them hanging around the neighborhood, though her parents say Sire is a "punk."

Rafaella – A neighborhood woman whose husband locks her in at night because she is beautiful and he fears she will leave him. She sends money down on a clothesline for Esperanza and her friends to buy her coconut or papaya juice.

Mamacita – An overweight neighborhood woman. Her husband worked hard to bring her from Mexico, but once she arrives on Mango Street, Mamacita never leaves the apartment and refuses to learn English.

Tito – The only named neighborhood boy, he pushes Esperanza into the water spurting from an open fire hydrant, and later steals Sally's keys to get her to kiss him and his friends.

Geraldo – A young Mexican man that Marin dances with one night and then is hit by a car. He dies because no surgeon helps him, and no one knows his last name.

Elenita – A "witch-woman" who Esperanza visits to learn her fortune. She tells Esperanza that she sees a "home in the heart."

Uncle Nacho – Esperanza's uncle, who dances with her after her cousin's baptism.

Aunt Lala – Esperanza's aunt, who gets her the job at the photo developing store.

Meme Ortiz – Meme's family moves into Cathy's vacated house. His real name is Juan and he has two dogs, and later he breaks his arms jumping out of a tree.

Louie – Marin's cousin, a boy from a Puerto Rican family that moves into the Ortiz's basement. Louie is friend of Esperanza's brothers and cousins with the young man who steals the Cadillac.

Earl – A neighbor who sleeps all day and works at night. He supposedly has a wife, but each neighbor sees him bringing home a different woman.

Lois – Sire's girlfriend, who doesn't know how to tie her shoes. Esperanza imagines being Lois and being held by Sire.

Esperanza's great-grandmother – The woman that Esperanza got her name from. She didn't want to get married but was forced into it, and so looked silently out the window her whole life.

Sister Superior – A nun at Esperanza's school, who distrusts Esperanza's mother's note and thinks her family lives in a run-down tenement.

Darius – A boy at school who is usually obnoxious but once says something Esperanza finds wise.

Edna – Ruthie's mother, a mean landlady.

Mr. Benny – A man who tells Esperanza and her friends that it is dangerous for girls their age to wear high-heeled shoes.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LANGUAGE AND NAMES

One of the most important themes of *The House on Mango Street* is the power of words. Esperanza first learns that the lack of language (especially English) means powerlessness, as with Mamacita, who is trapped in her apartment by her ignorance and fear of English. This leads to Esperanza understanding the power of controlling language, which first comes through the idea of names. Esperanza has only one name while most characters have several – an English and Spanish name, or nicknames – and she tries to change her name to empower herself and show the "real me."

Esperanza then expands from names to language itself, and she realizes that mastery over words brings a kind of freedom. She can translate her bad experiences into beautiful language (as she starts to write poetry), which both makes them less bad and helps her process them. Esperanza ultimately hopes to find physical freedom through her writing, as she vows to keep studying and escape Mango Street, yet part of her final promise to return for those "left behind" involves writing about their experiences and memorializing their suffering.



GENDER AND SEXUALITY

From the start of the book Esperanza realizes that men and women live in "separate worlds," and that women are nearly powerless in her society. There is a constant conflict between being a sexual being and keeping

one's freedom, as most of the book's female characters are trapped both by abusive husbands and needy children. Esperanza comes to recognize this dichotomy as she is caught between her own budding sexuality and her desire for freedom.

To try and reconcile the contradiction, Esperanza decides to become "beautiful and cruel" like a *femme fatale* of the movies – having both sexuality and autonomy – but she soon finds this impossible in the culture of Mango Street, as Sally is exploited by boys and Esperanza herself is assaulted and raped. Indeed, most of the men in the book are exploitative and violent, and the women rarely help each other, as Tito's mother ignores Sally's plight and Sally abandons Esperanza first in the Monkey Garden and then at the carnival. At the end of the book, when Esperanza imagines returning for "the ones left behind," she is thinking of the powerless women of Mango Street.



FOREIGNNESS AND SOCIETY

The House on Mango Street is set in a Latino community in Chicago, and on one level it is about building a cultural identity in a society where

Latinos are seen as foreign. Throughout the book, Esperanza must struggle against the feelings of shame and isolation that come with living in the barrio – she is ashamed of her shabby house and how her classmates see her as "different." Cathy, her first friend in the neighborhood, represents the people who leave when Latino families move into the neighborhood, and the white people of "Those Who Don't" who are afraid when they drive past. Esperanza's struggle against these prejudices leads to a dream of a house of her own—a house she owns, loves, and of which she can be proud—and finding freedom and identity through her writing.



IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY

Esperanza's essential goal is to be an autonomous individual who controls her own choices, a desire driven by her observations of the many trapped and powerless people of Mango Street. This desire is physically represented by her dream of a new house in a different place – at first it is a house for her family, but by the story's end it is a house that she alone owns, where she can write. She also symbolizes her dream of agency by trying to change her name to something that better shows the "real me."

The House on Mango Street also presents identity and autonomy in terms of culture and gender. The book is about coming of age as a Chicana, and it portrays the experiences of building a cultural identity in the face of suffering and prejudice. In gender terms, Esperanza wants to be loved by men, but she also doesn't want to become a trapped woman – as most of her married female neighbors have no agency whatsoever. In the end, Esperanza's goals focus on having a house of her own, mastering writing, and escaping Mango Street, and through

these she will be able to achieve her own identity and autonomy.



DREAMS AND BEAUTY

Dreams and beauty are spread throughout *The House on Mango Street*, and most often come as a means of escaping the harsh realities of life.

Esperanza's name means "hope" in Spanish, and dreams and beauty pervade even the writing style, which is poetic and dreamlike and scattered with internal rhymes like "their height was not tall, and their feet were very small." Esperanza's dream of a house also recurs throughout the book.

The idea of creating beauty offers another kind of dreaming and escape. Esperanza finds that describing things with beautiful language makes life seem less hard, and she starts to recite poems and write her own. The "**monkey garden**" represents another incarnation of escape through beauty, as the children create fantasies and mythologies to make their lives seem better. Throughout the book they also look up at clouds and compare them to people or objects. This fantasizing, like Esperanza's storytelling, becomes another form of hoping for something better in the future, or a life far from Mango Street.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SHOES

Shoes in *The House on Mango Street* symbolize Esperanza's sexuality, and then her inner conflict between that sexuality and her desire for independence. The symbolism begins when a neighbor gives her, Nenny, Rachel, and Lucy some old high-heeled shoes. They try them on and find that their legs look longer and more womanly, and they walk around getting lewd comments from men. This frightens the girls, and they discard the shoes.



THE MONKEY GARDEN

At a family party Esperanza gets new clothes but must wear her old saddle shoes, and she is so ashamed of them that she won't dance with a boy she wants to. When she finally dances with her uncle, her feet feel large and embarrassing. Later in the book, Sally's black suede shoes symbolize her sexual maturity, and Esperanza envies them as she befriends Sally. In the **monkey garden**, when Esperanza is being mocked by Sally and the boys, her own feet feel foreign to her – she is conflicted between her desire to be attractive and her desire to be free of male dominance.



THE THREE SISTERS

In Esperanza's vision of her dream house, one of its few specific characteristics is Esperanza's shoes beside the bed. This shows that an important part of her goals involves maturing into her own sexuality, while still retaining her independence and power.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage Books edition of *The House on Mango Street* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker), Mama, Papa

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The House on Mango Street is, as its title suggests, a book about home. Cisneros' protagonist, Esperanza, is very concerned with her family's house and the houses her friends and neighbors live in. Esperanza remembers a time when a nun from her school passed by and insulted her family's old flat and she felt ashamed at the conditions her family lived in.

For Esperanza, a house should be a symbol of safety and autonomy; and, it follows in her logic, a family's identity is closely tied to the home they live in. Esperanza's disappointment at the house on Mango Street fuels her dreams of the home she will own one day, and these reveries will recur throughout the book. Her parents assure her that the house on Mango Street is only a temporary stop for them, but even as a child Esperanza knows "how those things go." She knows they'll be there for a long time, if not forever.

Domesticity might be the single most important concept that Cisneros explores throughout the book. It frees people in certain ways and traps them in others--we see people enjoying their homes, moving in and out of homes, and trapped inside their homes by various oppressive forces.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ The boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In the world of Esperanza's childhood, there is a stark division between boys and girls (and, accordingly, between men and women). Esperanza and the other children of the barrio learn the intricacies of their gender roles by watching neighbors treat each other in certain ways. The fact that these gender roles are already so clear to Esperanza and the other children is indicative of their prominence in their society; instead of a bunch of kids playing together, they are already boys and girls, divided into two separate worlds.

As the book progresses, Esperanza witnesses the emerging sexuality of her peers and begins to encounter her own sexuality, too. This is a confusing state to be in, and Cisneros captures the confusion by blending these moments of sexual exploration with the brutality of gendered violence. Men beat their wives and daughters, and in most cases the sexual encounters in *The House on Mango Street* are unwanted. The boys and men of this book tend to *take* things, while the girls and women deal with the consequences. Esperanza knows all of this already, and it contributes greatly to her desire to escape Mango Street and the society it represents.

☝ Someday I will have a best friend of my own. One I can tell my secrets to. One who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them. Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Another of Esperanza's great hopes is to have friends who understand her more completely than the other neighborhood children she spends her time with. Here, after reflecting on the separate universes of boys and girls, and then on the apparent impossibility of being friends with

her younger sister Nenny, Esperanza turns as she often does to daydreaming.

Interestingly, Esperanza imagines her best friend as someone who seems to understand her jokes without her "having to explain them." In other words, a best friend wouldn't need Esperanza to use as many words to get her points across. Esperanza's fantasy is of a friendship that is founded not on shared language but on a mutual understanding of one another that would precede language.

Until she can find a friend like this, Esperanza muses, she is a "red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor." A red balloon would stand out, but it doesn't usually seem like Esperanza wants to "stand out" in a traditional sense. She's also tied to an anchor, unable to fly as she's meant to. So Esperanza's ideal friend would be someone she fits in with but also someone who helps her reach her full potential-- someone who doesn't hold her down as so many others seem to.

Chapter 4 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Language is another of the most important themes in *The House on Mango Street*, and the constant tension between English- and Spanish-speaking reflects the precarious, perhaps temporary, presence these characters have along Mango Street. The Spanish language marks Esperanza and the others as "foreign" to other people but also ties them to their culture and their families.

Within the category of language, names are especially important to Esperanza, who almost always notes the names of her neighbors as important parts of their vignettes. In this passage, Esperanza reflects on her own name. It's a family name, her great-grandmother's, and in this reflection Esperanza reveals a deep understanding of her own name; clearly she has asked her family about the name and remembered all the details. Named after her

great-grandmother because they were both born in the Chinese year of the horse, Esperanza's personal history crosses the boundary to yet another culture. But even there, where "the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong," she cannot escape the realities of her society's gender roles.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ You want a friend, she says. Okay, I'll be your friend. But only till next Tuesday. That's when we move away. Got to. Then as if she forgot I just moved in, she says the neighborhood is getting bad.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero, Cathy (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Esperanza always seems to be trying to make more friends, but here friendship is a fickle thing, ready to disappear when a family moves away from Mango Street. This is a humorous set-up, as Cathy offers her temporary friendship like a gift she'll soon take away. But Esperanza, always looking for friendship, will take what she can get and wants to befriend Cathy for now.

Then, as if Esperanza needs another reason to feel "foreign," unwanted, and ashamed, Cathy says her family is moving because "the neighborhood is getting bad." Esperanza registers the pain she feels at hearing Cathy say this, searching for a reason Cathy might have let it slip. She decides it was "as if she forgot" Esperanza's family had just moved in, but before we learn how Esperanza comes to understand Cathy's remark, Cisneros moves to another vignette. This lack of resolution in her storytelling might reflect the impossibility of Esperanza's emotional resolution.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ And since Marin's skirts are shorter and since her eyes are pretty, and since Marin is already older than us in many ways, the boys who do pass by say stupid things like I am in love with those two green apples you call eyes... And Marin just looks at them without blinking and is not afraid.

Marin, under the streetlight, dancing by herself, is singing the same song somewhere. I know. Is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker), Marin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis


Esperanza spends much of her time observing the other people who live on Mango Street and either replicating or resenting their behavior. But it's hard to tell how she feels about Marin, other than mystified by her sexuality and the way boys seem to gravitate toward her. Esperanza's feelings are obviously complex, and she might simultaneously desire what Marin has and feel disturbed by the way boys and men approach her to flirt. This complexity Esperanza reconciles by deciding the boys are saying "stupid things," as if trying to convince herself that she shouldn't want this to happen to her some day.

The second paragraph of this passage changes tone abruptly, as Esperanza reflects at the time of her writing on what Marin might be doing *now*. Because Marin is a fictional character described to us by another fictional character, and has no reality apart from her existence in Esperanza's story, this is also the only way the reader is able to imagine her. As a writer, Esperanza (like Cisneros) has the power to decide how her characters end up. And Marin, like so many women of Mango Street, is stuck forever waiting for something to happen, for someone to "change her life."

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout most of this book, Esperanza presents Mango Street as a world of its own, isolated in many ways from the places around it. But in passages like this one, she reflects on the outside perception of her neighborhood. Like many inner city neighborhoods, Esperanza's barrio is stigmatized as "dangerous" and feared by people coming into it.

To Esperanza, this is almost incomprehensible--they are simply people trying to live their lives--so she decides that

the people frightened of the barrio are "stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake." Because there is no basis for their fear, these outsiders must be stupid and lost. This is one way a young person might come to understand a fear they see in others but do not feel in themselves.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ No wonder everybody gave up. Just stopped looking out when little Efen chipped his buck tooth on a parking meter and didn't even stop Refugia from getting her head stuck between two slats in the back gate and nobody looked up not once the day Angel Vargas learned to fly and dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an "Oh."

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker), Rosa Vargas, Angel Vargas

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis



Like the gap Esperanza perceives between boys and girls on Mango Street, the gap between parents and children is often enormous. In a darkly comical way, Esperanza describes the way the Vargas children become so unruly that "everybody gave up" trying to keep them from getting themselves into trouble. This implies that people in the neighborhood usually look after one another's children, but that the Vargas family (who had too many children) became too much to handle.

This passage also shows Esperanza using language to distance herself somewhat from what happens around her. A very disturbing event, Angel Vargas' failed flight, is sublimated through the fantastic images of the "sugar donut" and the "falling star." The reader is left to wonder what other things may have happened to this unfortunate family, whose mother is too busy and has too many children.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ Here there is too much sadness and not enough sky. Butterflies too are few and so are flowers and most things that are beautiful. Still, we take what we can get and make the best of it.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33


Explanation and Analysis


At the beginning of this vignette, Esperanza declares: "You can never have too much sky." The sky is the embodiment of freedom, both as a natural phenomenon and as a symbol of upward mobility ("the sky's the limit"). Esperanza frequently turns toward nature when humanity lets her down, and dreams of escaping from Mango Street into a natural paradise.

But, still on Mango Street, "there is too much sadness and not enough sky." The natural beauty of the world is tainted by the everyday difficulty of getting by, and other beautiful things like butterflies and flowers are hard to find amidst all of Esperanza's disappointment at her current life. Yet she finds a certain hope in making "the best of it," and holding onto her dreams of a better future she continues to move forward.

☞ They are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops, but we just run.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero, Mr. Benny (speaker), Mr. Benny, Rachel, Lucy, Magdalena "Nenny" Cordero

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In the culmination of an episode suggesting Esperanza's attempts to figure out how she might fit into the world sexually, a number of people comment on the women's shoes Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel have just received. This marks a first public appearance for Esperanza in clothing--high heels--that tends to connote sexuality. And people react in many different ways to the sight of the girls in women's shoes.


Here, the grocer Mr. Benny warns the girls that wearing these shoes could be "dangerous," and threatens to call the police if they don't remove them. It's unclear what his intentions are; at first he seems to want to protect them, but when he threatens to call the cops this motive comes into question. No matter what Mr. Benny intends, his assertion

that the shoes could be dangerous reflects how deeply gendered and sexual violence is a part of their daily life. The clothes and shoes that Esperanza and the other children wear can become signals for aggressive behavior, but the girls shrug off the possibility and continue on their way--still relatively innocent, for now.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☞ 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... 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.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero, Sister Superior (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In one of the more tragic vignettes in *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza tries to change some aspect of her daily life by gaining access to the school canteen. When the nuns don't let her stay for lunch at school, and Esperanza tries to explain that her house is too far, the head nun points to some house outside and claims it belongs to Esperanza's family.

Ashamed at the situation and upset, Esperanza doesn't correct the nun's mistake. Esperanza's unease with her family's living situation is central to the book, and here the nun is quietly brutal in her refusal to let Esperanza have a small victory and use the canteen. By the time Esperanza does go to the canteen, allowed to be there just for a day, she finds it unappealing and cries her way through a cold lunch.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞ Then he asked if I knew what day it was, and when I said I didn't, he said it was his birthday and would I please give him a birthday kiss. I thought I would because he was so old and just as I was about to put my lips on his cheek, he grabs my face with both hands and kisses me hard on the mouth and doesn't let go.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of many instances in *The House on Mango Street* where a girl endures an unwanted sexual advance from a man. Usually the men have some way of convincing the girls to kiss them; in this case the man claims he wants a birthday kiss and forces Esperanza to kiss him on the lips instead.

These advances make Esperanza's own sexual growth an even more confused affair. It seems like, the more these men take advantage of her and her friends, the less willing she is to explore her own sexuality in the way she wants to. Instead, Esperanza tries to shut off this aspect of her life, insisting that boys and girls inhabit different universes entirely, and daydreams of an escape from the oppressive, sometimes frightening world of Mango Street.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero, Aunt Lupe (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis


Feeling guilty about it, Esperanza tells of the time she and her friends imitated a bedridden aunt; this reflection leads her to remember some of the last things her aunt said to her. Strangely, this aunt is one of the only people who speak directly to Esperanza about her writing. As in other vignettes in *The House on Mango Street*, the wisdom Esperanza might ignore as a kid probably ends up most important to her later in her life and her writing career. This is strongly suggested by Esperanza's confession that "at that time I didn't know what she meant."

The aunt, bedridden for some time, speaks of freedom through creativity, suggesting she's gained insight through her condition. In a way, this offers radical hope for Esperanza, who has also felt stuck for quite some time. But the reader, like the young Esperanza, has to wonder what it means for writing to keep someone free.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ What about a house, I say, because that's what I came for. Ah, yes, a home in the heart. I see a home in the heart.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero, Elenita (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Disappointed by what the fortune teller has told her thus far, Esperanza directly confronts the question most important to her: what about a house? Unfortunately, Elenita will not give Esperanza the reassurance that she wants--but she still offers some even more valuable information.

Throughout the book, arguably, Esperanza is building a "home in the heart," even as she longs more tangibly for a physical house. The "home in the heart" she is constructing as she grows up is her identity, autonomy, and sense of self--something that, if strong enough, does not have to be entirely shaped by external situations and surroundings, but instead provides a sense of both safety and freedom.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ Ruthie sees lovely things everywhere. I might be telling her a joke and she'll stop and say: The moon is beautiful like a balloon. Or somebody might be singing and she'll point to a few clouds: Look, Marlon Brando.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker), Ruthie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Among all the difficulties on Mango Street, certain characters find their own ways to be happy. Ruthie is one of these, and sees "lovely things everywhere" despite what seems like a tough living situation. It's not clear what makes Ruthie this way, or how old Ruthie might be (though Esperanza calls her a "lady," not a girl). And Ruthie's personality might also signal some detachment from reality or intellectual disability.

There's something poetic about Ruthie's presence in the book, in the sense that she sees beauty everywhere but doesn't achieve or even seek success in a traditional way.

Ruthie offers a pure joy that is rare on Mango Street and in this book; in this way, she serves one of the purposes that Esperanza seems to hope her writing will serve too.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝☝ Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I want to be all new and shiny. I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see.

A boy held me once so hard, I swear, I felt the grip and weight of his arms, but it was a dream.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Esperanza is full of potential that is waiting to be realized, and this passage offers the most succinct depiction of this potential. She knows she has much more to do in her life, and puts it beautifully here: she is "waiting to explode like Christmas." On Christmas she gets "new and shiny" things, and she wants to achieve her own sort of rebirth as a "bad" girl, sitting with boys and alone no longer--but also in control of her own sexuality and fate.

Esperanza's desire is to have these things, not simply to dream about them any longer ("imagining what I can't see"). She wants to cross over from the fiction she creates for herself into a real life closer to what she really wants. The desire to be "bad" might be a rebellion against the norms impressed upon her, but it also comes from a place of physical desire as we see when she remembers the dream of a boy holding her so tightly.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝☝ Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep...

When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees... Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74-75

Explanation and Analysis

Right after her reflection on what she really wants-- to be with a boy and not in her house, looking at trees through her window-- Esperanza returns to thinking about the four trees outside her house. This is one of many vignettes that center nature as a place of refuge from the difficulties that society and other people bring into Esperanza's life. But, at the same time, Esperanza personifies the trees, giving them "hairy toes" and "violent teeth" like the men she so wants to escape. And like some of the women she thinks about, the trees' strength is "secret."

Ultimately, the trees remind Esperanza that it's possible to hold on simply for the sake of holding on. The trees don't have the burden of feeling "too sad and too skinny," but they do have to grow through concrete. Like Esperanza, they are forced to thrive in an environment that would try to stop them from doing so.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☝☝ On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker), Rafaela

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Rafaela is one of a few women in *The House on Mango Street* whose husbands control their behavior and lock them (in Rafaela's case, literally) into an almost entirely domestic existence. Leaning out the window, another common behavior for the women of this book, somehow makes Rafaela older; this might mean that her longing is wearing her out, as she looks out on the world from the house she's stuck inside.

Her husband's great fear, that she is "too beautiful to look at," betrays either a mistrust of Rafaela (she'll be lured into infidelity) or of other men (they'll take advantage of her). Either way, Rafaela's husband clearly sees her as a

possession that must be guarded, and fears that letting his wife have autonomy will result in some sort of catastrophe. And because this sort of controlling relationship is ignored, if not accepted, by other people, Rafaela is trapped inside her home. This reflects the nightmare flip-side of Esperanza's dream of a home for herself. A home can be a place of freedom and self-expression, or a domestic trap as it is for Rafaela and for the fairy-tale figure of Rapunzel, who is also mentioned in this vignette.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☝☝ Sally, do you sometimes wish you didn't have to go home? Do you wish your feet would one day keep walking and take you far away from Mango Street, far away and maybe your feet would stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps for you to climb up two by two upstairs to where a room is waiting for you.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker), Sally

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza projects some of her own fantasies onto Sally, a girl whom Esperanza latches onto as a symbol of things she might not see in herself (like beauty, sexuality, or boldness). Esperanza sees the way Sally's demeanor changes drastically when she has to go home from school, and wonders if Sally also wants to get far away from Mango Street.

When Esperanza imagines her dream homes, there is never anyone else inside, especially not a husband. In her dreams, homes are safe, open, ready to fulfill her own needs. This must be what Sally wants too, Esperanza figures. Perhaps, by telling these stories and imagining what other people want, Esperanza begins to feel less strange and less alone in what she desires.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☝☝ One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza assures herself and her readers that her achievement of her great goal of having a nice home for herself will not lead to her leaving her past behind. One of the great conflicts of this book is the difficulty of reconciling the desire to find a new home for oneself with the wish to honor the home one came from. Even if Esperanza doesn't see her family's house on Mango Street as her home, she realizes the importance of her family and neighbors, and of her community more broadly. This is why she plans to house "bums" in her attic. Esperanza wants to follow her escapist fantasies but still find a way to make the world a better place and honor the community she came from. Perhaps, then, her home can be a place of comfort not just for her but, occasionally, for the homeless too.

Chapter 35 Quotes

☝☝ In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away.

I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Usually Esperanza gets her ideas of how to be one type of woman or another from the girls and women she sees in her neighborhood, but in this case she remembers "the movies" and their trope of the femme fatale.


This is one model around which Esperanza can shape her strong desire for both sexuality and independence--she wants to be desired by men, but she also doesn't want to end up as another "trapped woman" of Mango Street. Like the trees with their "silent strength," Esperanza here decides to wage a "quiet war" against the expectations placed upon her, weighing her down every day. Although this "quiet war" rather humorously only manifests itself here in her leaving the dinner table without cleaning up, this


shows that Esperanza already understands the many ways her independence is restricted or looked down upon as a woman--she knows there is even a way to leave the table "like a man."

Chapter 38 Quotes

☝☝ Somebody started the lie that the monkey garden had been there before anything. We liked to think the garden could hide things for a thousand years. There beneath the roots of soggy flowers were the bones of murdered pirates and dinosaurs, the eye of a unicorn turned to coal.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The monkey garden, occupied earlier in the book by a southern family that seems to scare Esperanza and the others away, is transformed (after the southern family leaves) into a mythical place. This is one of the only vignettes in which Esperanza plays energetically, liberated for at least a little while from the difficulties of living on Mango Street and losing herself in beauty and fantasy.


Even still, Esperanza is aware of the "lie" being told about the monkey garden. This makes us wonder what separates lies from stories, because Esperanza is constantly dreaming and telling stories. What the kids "liked to think" is truer for them than anything else, and it's refreshing in a way to see Esperanza and the other kids dreaming about pirates, dinosaurs, and even a unicorn.

Chapter 41 Quotes

☝☝ When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are.

Related Characters: The Three Sisters (speaker), Esperanza Cordero

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

In this strange vignette, wherein Esperanza visits the home of her two friends and their recently deceased baby sister, Rachel and Lucy's three aunts remind us of the fortune teller from earlier in the book. They have a dreamlike presence, coming "with the wind" and "barely noticed" by the people of Mango Street (and perhaps echoing the Three Fates of classical Greek mythology). We might even wonder whether Esperanza dreams this passage or really experiences it.


Either way, one of the aunts tells Esperanza to come back for her community when she leaves. The mysterious aunts, like a three-headed fortune teller, intuit Esperanza's desire to get far away from Mango Street and encourage her to do so only under the condition that she return for "the others"--the same people Esperanza thinks she needs to escape. That Esperanza is bound to these people by their mutual residence on Mango Street is one of the main difficulties she faces. But the aunt tells her not to even try to escape Mango Street in an emotional sense. This wisdom seems to stick with Esperanza, who ends up writing all these vignettes as a kind of affirmation of the power her writing has given her--and using this power to figuratively "come back" for the trapped, powerless women of Mango Street.

Chapter 43 Quotes

☝☝ Not a man's house... A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed... Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Though Esperanza dreams repeatedly of her future home, this is the most detailed image she conjures up. It won't be a "man's house," where she is forced to stay inside and do chores. A porch will mark her territory, and a pillow will

offer her a permanent place to sleep. Other images from earlier in the book recur here: the flowers remind us of the Monkey Garden and the four trees outside her home on Mango Street, and the two shoes remind us of all the other shoes mentioned in her vignettes. In this way, her home will contain all the things that have been important to her throughout these stories; but they'll be hers, under her control, "clean as paper before the poem." The act of dreaming about her home is like writing for Esperanza; both are creative acts that give her a sense of her future and the freedom she can still attain.

Chapter 44 Quotes

☝ 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.

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esperanza explores one of her primary motivations for writing: self-liberation. By writing about Mango Street, Esperanza gains some distance from it. This is something of a paradox, because we might think that spending time thinking and writing about a place would only bring you more tightly into its grasp. But for Esperanza, language has the power to help her process events and let them go, at least somewhat.

Still Esperanza dreams of letting Mango (here personified as a woman who is both constricting and liberating) go

entirely. The "books and paper" that she wants to fill her very own house will allow her to distance herself from the painful and often shameful past she experienced on Mango Street. And there's an aspect of inevitability to Esperanza's escape: she is "too strong" to be stuck forever in a home that isn't really home to her, and so she no longer feels that desperate desire to escape--she knows it *will* happen, sooner or later.

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

Related Characters: Esperanza Cordero (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing moment of the book, Cisneros reflects through Esperanza's voice on the complexity of leaving one's community to become a writer. Esperanza imagines her friends and neighbors wondering where she went, and fears they will not know she "has gone away to come back." Having always dreamed of getting away, Esperanza is still aware of the way her departure might appear to her community-- as a desertion of the life she comes from. She plans to leave in order to better herself and return stronger to her community (whether literally or figuratively, through writing and memory), but cannot ensure that her neighbors on Mango Street understand this intention.

The book closes with a sort of dedication from both Cisneros and her protagonist: "For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out." If getting away from Mango Street is always Esperanza's dream, she still cares for the people there; and she hopes that her writing will offer some sort of liberation and affirmation for the people, like her, who feel trapped in a place that isn't exactly home.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

Esperanza, the young narrator (who does not introduce herself at first), explains how her family moved around a lot before coming to live on Mango Street. There are six members of the family – Esperanza, her Mama and Papa, her younger sister Nenny, and her younger brothers Carlos and Kiki. They moved out of their last apartment because the pipes broke and the landlord wouldn't fix them.

The family had always dreamed of owning their own house, a white house with lots of rooms and trees in the yard, but the house on Mango Street is small and falling apart. It is still an improvement over their earlier residences, though, as at least they own the house and so don't have to deal with landlords. At their old apartment a nun from Esperanza's school had seen Esperanza playing out front and made her feel ashamed of where she lived.

Esperanza's parents assure her that the house on Mango Street is only temporary, but Esperanza doubts their word. She still clings to the dream of having her own house, one she can be proud of, and she remains dissatisfied with the house on Mango Street.

CHAPTER 2: HAIRS

Esperanza describes the hair types of each member of her family. Her own hair is "lazy" and doesn't act like she wants it to. Her mother's hair is curly and beautiful, and it smells like warm bread. Esperanza likes to sleep near her mother and smell her hair.

Cisneros introduces her narrative style in this first section – short chapters that also act as individual vignettes or prose poems. Esperanza does not introduce herself yet, as she is still constructing a name and identity for herself, and for now her story is more about her observations and memories.



The dream of a better, more beautiful, and more autonomous house will carry on throughout the book – Esperanza and her family and neighbors are always hoping and dreaming of something better. The nun's comment is the first example of society shaming Esperanza for her race and class.



Part of Esperanza clinging to the dream of her own house involves feeling like she doesn't belong on Mango Street. For now she will purposefully try to keep this neighborhood out of her identity.



This shows how the chapters flow – they are short and only vaguely connected sometimes, as a young girl might associate things as her attention wanders. Esperanza's mother appears as a comforting female presence here, but will not return for a while. This section also captures Esperanza's discomfort with herself at this stage of her life through her dislike of and inability to tame her own hair.



CHAPTER 3: BOYS & GIRLS

Esperanza explains that the boys and girls “live in separate worlds” in her neighborhood. For example, Carlos and Kiki (her brothers) don’t speak to Esperanza outside of the house just because she’s a girl. Esperanza can only socialize with her sister Nenny, who is too young to be her real friend and must constantly be taken care of. Esperanza dreams of having a best friend of her own one day. Without such a friend she is like a red balloon “tied to an anchor.”

Esperanza already understands some of the gender disparity in her society, but for now it is innocent and confined to her siblings. Her desire for a best friend “of her own” is an early incarnation of her goal of autonomy. More images of flying will recur later, as symbol of an escape through beauty or physically leaving Mango Street.



CHAPTER 4: MY NAME

Esperanza, the narrator, reveals her name for the first time. She explains that it means “hope” in English, but in Spanish it means “sadness” and “waiting.” She got the name from her great-grandmother, and they were both born in the Chinese year of the horse. This is supposed to be a sign of bad luck for women, but Esperanza refuses to believe this, because the horse is a strong animal and Esperanza says that the Chinese, like the Mexicans, want women to be weak.

Esperanza starts to discover the power of words through names here. Her name is symbolic of both her current state and the book itself – sad and longing to escape, but also hopeful and strong. Esperanza’s thought about weak women is surely repeated from someone else, but shows she has a keen understanding of gender issues in her community.



Esperanza describes what she knows of her great-grandmother – she was a “wild horse of a woman” who did not want to get married, but was eventually forced into it. She never forgave her husband and spent her whole life looking out the window. Esperanza states that she does not want to inherit her great-grandmother’s “place by the window” along with her name.

Women trapped and looking out the window will become a recurring motif in the novel. The original Esperanza is the first “trapped woman” of the story, and Esperanza already knows that she does not want to share her great-grandmother’s fate. She understands that being strong like a horse can be a good thing, but the phrase “wild horse of a woman” also shows how the community sees strong women as somehow non-feminine.



Esperanza describes how her name is pronounced differently in Spanish and in English and at school. She wants to change her name to something that shows her true, secret self. She decides that a name like “Zeze the X” would be good.

Esperanza’s desire to change her name shows both an understanding of the power of language and a desire for her own identity and agency.



CHAPTER 5: CATHY QUEEN OF CATS

Cathy is one of Esperanza’s neighbors who has lots of cats and claims to be related to the queen of France. She talks to Esperanza about the neighbors on Mango Street, and insults almost all of them. Cathy agrees to be Esperanza’s friend until the next Tuesday, when her family is moving away. Cathy says the neighborhood is getting bad. This offends Esperanza, as families like hers just started moving in.

Cathy shows how the racist views of Anglo-American society views toward the Latinos moving onto Mango Street which holds that the neighborhood is deteriorating simply because the Latinos are arriving. Meanwhile, Cathy’s family is no better than Esperanza’s, and Cathy must also create a dream of a better life for herself – that she is related to royalty.



CHAPTER 6: OUR GOOD DAY

One day two poor neighborhood girls named Lucy and Rachel (who are sisters) promise to be Esperanza's friend if she will pitch in five dollars for a bike. Cathy wants Esperanza to avoid Lucy and Rachel because they "smell like a broom," but Esperanza feels drawn to them and willingly gives up her friendship with Cathy for them. Esperanza uses the three dollars she has saved and takes two from Nenny and gives them to Lucy and Rachel.

The girls introduce themselves – Lucy and Rachel are Chicano girls from Texas, and they don't laugh at Esperanza's name like she expects them to. Even though Nenny technically owns part of the bike now, Esperanza decides to keep the bike and new friends to herself for a while. The three girls ride the bike together (seated on different parts of it) around the neighborhood, and Esperanza describes the crumbling buildings and dangerous avenues.

Esperanza feels she has found the friends she longed for in chapter 3, "Boys & Girls." As she does with the other Latinos moving in (except for Esperanza, seemingly), Cathy looks down on Rachel and Lucy, but Esperanza is perhaps drawn to them because they share her status as an "outsider." These are people who could be real friends, who don't look down on her based on her heritage.



Having a bike as well as friends "of her own" is part of Esperanza's desire for autonomy, and getting these things all at once – without having to share them with Nenny – is what makes this such a "good day." Esperanza gives a larger picture of her neighborhood here – it is clearly poor and neglected by the rest of the city.



CHAPTER 7: LAUGHTER

Esperanza says that even though she and Nenny don't look very much alike (like Rachel and Lucy do), they still have a lot in common as sisters. They both laugh suddenly and loudly like "dishes breaking." One day Esperanza sees a house that reminds her of Mexico, though she can't explain why. Rachel and Lucy laugh at her, but Nenny immediately understands what Esperanza means.

This chapter following the previous shows that while Esperanza has found friends (as she longed for), in some ways Nenny still understands her best. Esperanza cannot share everything with Rachel and Lucy, and she must still create her own identity and grow up mostly alone.



CHAPTER 8: GIL'S FURNITURE BOUGHT & SOLD

There is a junk store in the neighborhood owned by an old black man. He doesn't turn on the store lights unless he knows the customers have money. Esperanza's family bought their refrigerator from this store, and Esperanza once bought a little Statue of Liberty there for a dime. The store is full of piles of mysterious old items with winding aisles between them.

The story begins to expand now to portray more of the peripheral characters of Mango Street, as Esperanza starts to explore her world. The owner of the store is the only black character in the novel, and so seems foreign to Esperanza (she is afraid to talk to him), which puts her own "otherness" in perspective.



Esperanza and Nenny wander through the maze of stuff in the dark. Esperanza is afraid to talk to the owner, but Nenny asks him lots of questions. One day Nenny asks him about a pretty box, and the old man opens it. It is a music box, and the song that plays is very moving to Esperanza. She tries to describe the music with images of moths, or drops of water, or marimbas. Esperanza has to turn away so Nenny won't see her being "stupid" and crying. Nenny wants to buy the music box, but the old man says it isn't for sale.

The themes of beauty and language are fully introduced here, as Esperanza starts to test her poetic sense by trying to describe the music with different images. The music moves her to tears, and clearly both Nenny and the owner are entranced as well, as the owner won't sell the box. For all of them, the beauty of the music takes them out of their surroundings and lets them escape to a better place in their mind, and also momentarily joins them together in the experience of beauty despite their differences.



CHAPTER 9: MEME ORTIZ

Meme Ortiz moves into Cathy's house when her family leaves. Meme's real name is Juan, and he has a sheepdog with both an English and a Spanish name. The house (which Cathy's father built) is wooden and lopsided. In the back yard is a huge, "fat" tree. The children choose this tree for a "Tarzan Jumping Contest." Meme wins, but breaks both of his arms in the process.

Meme and his dogs both emphasize the theme of names and show the bi-culturalism of the neighborhood. In this society that is divided between the Latino and the Anglo-American, it is even more difficult for a child to form her identity. The images of trees and falling (trying to fly and failing) are also recurring motifs.



CHAPTER 10: LOUIE, HIS COUSIN & HIS OTHER COUSIN

Meme Ortiz's family rents their basement as an apartment to a family from Puerto Rico. Louie is the oldest son of the Puerto Rican family, and he becomes friends with one of Esperanza's brothers. Louie's cousin Marin also lives with them in the basement. She is older than Esperanza and wears dark nylons and lots of makeup, which she gets for free from selling Avon makeup.

The character of Marin first introduces the theme of sexuality. She is older and more experienced, and her clothing and appearance suggest a kind of sexual maturity that Esperanza finds admirable. The neighborhood is not only Chicano (Mexican-American) but Latino (all Central and South American).



Louie has another cousin who drives up one day in a fancy yellow Cadillac. He lets all the neighborhood kids get in the car and Louie's cousin drives around the block several times. Esperanza is awed by the soft seats and automatic windows. The seventh time the car goes around the block, police cars appear with their sirens on. Louie's cousin makes everyone get out of the car and then he tries to race off, but he crashes into a lamppost at the end of the alley. The police arrest him (it's implied that he stole the car), and the neighborhood kids wave at him as he is driven away.

Louie's cousin's crime shows both the darker side of the barrio and another means of trying to escape. Stealing a car is a serious crime, but Louie's cousin seemingly only wants it to take a joy ride and impress the neighborhood children. This is, in its own way, a kind of dreaming through something more beautiful than real life – in this case a beautiful car. Yet such dreams are only accessible to Louie through theft.



CHAPTER 11: MARIN

Marin (Louie's cousin) has a boyfriend back in Puerto Rico whom she secretly wants to marry when she returns. At the same time Marin also wants to stay in Chicago and get a "real job," and meet a rich man on the subway who will take her away to a big house. Esperanza knows she is going to be sent back to Puerto Rico, though, because Louie's parents say she is too much trouble.

Marin tries to find romance and escape in the idea of a rich Chicago man. In this way she is trying to "fly away" like most everyone else on Mango Street, but Esperanza already knows that she will fail and be sent back to Puerto Rico.



Esperanza likes Marin, who has lots of useful knowledge – like how girls get pregnant, how to remove facial hair, and superstitions about fingernails and boys. Marin spends all day babysitting Louie's little sisters, and she is only allowed to go outside at night, and then only on the front porch. Every night Marin smokes a cigarette and dances to the radio, waiting for boys to notice her. Boys try to pick her up, but Marin never acts afraid of them, which seems brave to Esperanza.

Marin is the first older female that Esperanza looks up to (other than her mother). Unfortunately most of the women in the neighborhood offer Esperanza examples of what she doesn't want to become, as Esperanza already knows that Marin's dream of being saved by an American man will never come true. Her shared wisdom and superstitions become a part of Esperanza growing up, though.



As the chapter ends Esperanza imagines Marin somewhere else in the future. She is dancing beneath a streetlight, waiting for “a star to fall,” for a man to arrive and save her.

Again there are images of falling and flying, as Marin waits for someone to save her. In contrast, Esperanza already knows that she wants to save herself, instead of waiting for a man.



CHAPTER 12: THOSE WHO DON'T

Esperanza describes the people who come into her neighborhood and are afraid. They think everyone there is dangerous, and will stab them with knives. Esperanza and the other children of Mango Street aren't afraid, because they know the people who look so dangerous to outsiders, like Davey's crooked-eyed brother, and the tall man with the hat, and the mentally disabled Eddie V. However, Esperanza does admit that when she goes to a neighborhood “of another color” she gets scared too.

This is Esperanza's most direct description of the racial prejudice she faces every day. Yet she acknowledges that she also would feel afraid in a neighborhood foreign from her own. Her narration here implies that such fear depends on a lack of knowledge of the neighborhood and its residents, who likely aren't actually as dangerous as they may appear to those who don't know them.



CHAPTER 13: THERE WAS AN OLD WOMAN SHE HAD SO MANY CHILDREN SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO

Esperanza talks about the Vargas family – there is a single mother (Rosa) and her many children, who are wild and uncontrollable. Rosa still cries every day for the children's father, who left without even an explanation. The children have no concern for themselves, anyone else, or valuable objects. At first people try warn them about their misbehavior, but eventually everyone gives up just like Rosa Vargas, and the children continue to do whatever they like. It gets to the point that no one even looks up when one day Angel Vargas “learned to fly,” and falls from a high place “like a falling star” and dies.

Rosa is another trapped woman, but this time she is helpless in the face of her missing husband (or boyfriend) and many wild children. Angel Vargas is yet another example of the people of Mango Street trying to “fly” and falling instead. It begins to become clear that these vignettes are not necessarily in chronological order, but are connected by Esperanza's free-association and childlike logic, as Angel Vargas will appear in later story, still alive.



CHAPTER 14: ALICIA WHO SEES MICE

Alicia is a girl who has to do all the chores for her father and younger siblings because her mother died. She goes to college even though she has to travel a long time by train and bus to get there, because she doesn't want to be stuck in a kitchen or factory her whole life. She stays up late studying and it is then that she sees the mice come out. Alicia's father says the mice don't exist, and that Alicia should be sleeping anyway, because it is a woman's job to wake up early and make tortillas.

This section shows clearly the male-dominated society of Mango Street, and how difficult it will be for Esperanza to escape and achieve independence. Alicia seems very similar to Esperanza – she is trying to study so she can improve her life, but she is trapped by patriarchal traditions that require her to assume her dead mother's duties, to act in the way and do the work that their society traditionally believes girls should..



CHAPTER 15: DARIUS & THE CLOUDS

Esperanza describes how she loves the sky, and how in her neighborhood there is not enough sky or other beautiful things like butterflies and flowers. One day at school a boy named Darius (whom Esperanza doesn't like because he torments girls and acts tough) says something Esperanza finds very wise. He points up at a fluffy cloud and says that the cloud is God.

Esperanza comments directly on how beautiful things (especially clouds, which recur often) help take her away from Mango Street. Cisneros implies that the society of the barrio might make Darius "act tough," when actually he has a poetic sensibility similar to Esperanza's.



CHAPTER 16: AND SOME MORE

One day Esperanza, Nenny, Rachel, and Lucy are looking at clouds and chatting aimlessly. Esperanza says that Eskimos have thirty different names for snow, and then the girls start talking about names for people and clouds. Esperanza names the cumulus and nimbus clouds in the sky, while Nenny starts listing commonplace names (like Nancy, Mildred, Joey). The rest of the chapter is interspersed with Nenny's litany of names. Rachel and Lucy compare the clouds to things like hair, and one of them says that Esperanza has a fat ugly face. This leads to a playful battle of insults between the girls.

The cloud of the last chapter continues here, as well as the emphasis on poetry and language (and names). Esperanza's interest in the scientific names of clouds suggests that she is already more "scholarly" than the other girls, but all of them have the ability to make surprising and poetic comparisons. We first see Esperanza's "speaking voice" here, and an example of daily interaction between the girls.



CHAPTER 17: THE FAMILY OF LITTLE FEET

Esperanza begins to tell a poetic, partially-rhyming fairy tale of a family with small, fat feet. She starts describing the feet of each family member and then the story blends into reality – it is a day when someone gives Esperanza, Nenny, Rachel, and Lucy a paper bag full of old high-heeled **shoes**.

Here Cisneros begins to blend the actual narrative of the story with poetry, as well as showing Esperanza's story-telling voice. The image of shoes as symbols of sexuality begins in this chapter.



The girls try on the **shoes** and are amazed at how long and womanly their legs suddenly seem. They strut about the neighborhood and a man named Mr. Benny warns them that such shoes are "dangerous" for little girls to wear, but they ignore him. Other boys and men catcall at them, and a bum flirts with Rachel, asking her to kiss him for a dollar. Lucy is frightened by this encounter and she makes the girls leave, and they all run home. Lucy hides the shoes under a basket on her back porch. Later Rachel and Lucy's mother throws them away, but the girls are glad that they're gone.

The dangerous world of men is fully revealed to the girls here. It is scary to be viewed as a sexual object by those who have physical and social power over them. For now they can discard their sexuality as easily as a pair of shoes, but soon Esperanza will have to deal with growing up – both the danger of her male-dominated society, and the pleasure she gets from being desirable.



CHAPTER 18: A RICE SANDWICH

Esperanza is jealous of “the special kids” who get to eat lunch in “the canteen” at school instead of having to go home to eat. One day she asks her mother to write a note giving her permission to pack a lunch and eat in the canteen. At first her mother is reluctant because she thinks that all her children will want bag lunches then, but Esperanza convinces her that she is the only one who wants to stay at school, and her absence will make her mother appreciate her more.

The next day Esperanza’s mother writes a note and packs a rice sandwich. At lunch time, the Sister Superior doesn’t accept Esperanza’s mother’s note, which is awkwardly written. The Sister Superior thinks Esperanza lives close to school, and she points to some run-down apartments and accuses Esperanza of living there. Esperanza is so upset that she admits to living there, even though she does not. Esperanza starts to cry, and the nun lets her eat at the canteen that day, but not afterward. Esperanza cries and eats her rice sandwich while the other children watch her.

The divide between Esperanza’s race and class and that of the rest of her school is most evident in this section, as she feels inferior and wants to be like the “special” kids. Esperanza shows some humor and versatility in her speaking voice as she convinces her mother to pack a lunch.



This is the second time Esperanza has been shamed by a nun and made to feel second-class as compared to the wealthier Anglo-American students. Esperanza also sees the power of English and the written language here – as her mother’s note is awkwardly written and so doesn’t convince the nun, and renders Esperanza herself helpless.



CHAPTER 19: CHANCLAS

Esperanza’s cousin gets baptized and Esperanza’s mother buys her new clothes for the event, but she forgets to get Esperanza new **shoes** to match. There is a party after the baptism, and her mother drinks and dances happily. Everyone has a good time except for Esperanza, who is ashamed of her old brown saddle shoes. A boy asks her to dance but she declines. Finally her Uncle Nacho convinces Esperanza to dance, and they dance beautifully while everyone watches. At first Esperanza feels that her feet are big and ugly, but by the end she forgets about her shoes. Everyone claps and the boy watches Esperanza dance the rest of the night.

The memory of the lunch leads to another embarrassing event – Esperanza’s shame at her childish shoes. Shoes symbolize sexuality again here, as Esperanza is in a transition state, and first experiences her emerging sexuality as a desire to be desired by the boy at the dance. Unfortunately her own self-imposed embarrassment paralyzes her, just like when the nun shamed her for where she lived. This shows that Esperanza is still very sensitive, and her own shame will be another obstacle in the way of her development.



CHAPTER 20: HIPS

Esperanza, Nenny, Rachel, and Lucy are jumping rope one day and talking about hips. Rachel says that hips are good for propping up babies, and Lucy says you need them to dance. Nenny says if you don’t get them you might become a man. Esperanza defends Nenny’s opinion because she is her sister, and then she offers a scientific explanation of hips (repeating what she heard from Alicia). Esperanza starts to make things up, saying that you have to learn to walk a certain way with them. Nenny says hips are musical, which Esperanza thinks is a stupid idea at first, but then she agrees.

Esperanza’s budding sexuality is expanded here, as the girls discuss the hips they are beginning to develop. As with the clouds, Esperanza (when speaking with her friends) seems interested in “scientific explanations,” which contrasts with her amorphous, poetic writing voice. Nenny proves herself as wise and observant in a similar way to her sister, despite Esperanza’s criticism.



The girls start jumping rope and making up rhymes about hips. Each girl makes up her own chant except for Nenny, who repeats an old song she already knows. Rachel and Lucy are “disgusted” by her childishness, but Esperanza sees that Nenny is off in her own world.

Cisneros again incorporates childlike rhymes into the written narration, making the chapter seem more poetic and dreamlike. The children use rhyme to process their world – in this case, their unfamiliar sexuality.



CHAPTER 21: THE FIRST JOB

Esperanza and her family both want her to find a job, as her school is expensive and they need money. One day Esperanza comes home after letting a boy named Tito push her into the water of an open fire hydrant. Her Aunt Lala is in the kitchen, and she says that she has found Esperanza a job at a photo developing store. To get the job Esperanza just has to show up and lie that she is older than she is.

This is the first real example of flirting that Esperanza admits to. It flows with the previous sections where her sexuality began to emerge, and (along with her first job) seems to represent a healthy development for Esperanza, though this will be broken by the chapter’s end.



Her job involves matching negatives with prints – it is easy work, but Esperanza is uncomfortable with the social aspect of the job. She is afraid to eat in the company lunchroom, so she eats lunch in the bathroom and takes her breaks in the coat room. One afternoon an old Asian man who works there greets Esperanza and offers to eat lunch with her the next day. Esperanza feels less nervous around him, but then the man asks Esperanza for a kiss, because he says it’s his birthday. Esperanza leans in to kiss his cheek, but then the man grabs her face and kisses her hard on the mouth.

Esperanza first sees the violent side of her potential sexuality here, as her innocent kiss turns into an assault by the old man, which foreshadows her later rape. Sexuality is no longer accompanied by dancing and rhymes as in the previous sections; here it something violent and oppressive. Esperanza begins to learn the sexual double standard of her society – she is becoming a woman, and most women are powerless on Mango Street.



CHAPTER 22: PAPA WHO WAKES UP TIRED IN THE DARK

One morning Esperanza’s father tells her that her *abuelito* (grandfather) has died, and he cries, which is shocking for Esperanza. Her father has to fly to Mexico for the funeral, and Esperanza will have to tell her younger siblings the news, and explain that they must be quiet and not play today. Esperanza imagines what it would be like if her father died, and she describes him waking up in the dark each morning and leaves for work. Esperanza holds him in her arms.

This section shows Esperanza empathizing with her father, which is the first time she has explicitly tried to look at the world through someone else’s eyes—a sign of maturity and growing artistic ability. Esperanza must also act like a parent while her father is gone, as she has to keep her younger siblings quiet. The two places of the family’s identity – Chicago and Mexico – are also emphasized here.



CHAPTER 23: BORN BAD

Esperanza, Rachel, and Lucy all pray for themselves – they think they are going to hell because they made fun of Esperanza’s Aunt Lupe. Aunt Lupe was beautiful and a good swimmer in her youth, but she has been an invalid all of Esperanza’s life. Esperanza wonders when the curse of her sickness fell upon Aunt Lupe. She has heard that Lupe dove into the pool the wrong way once, or fell from a high stool, but Esperanza thinks that disease picks people randomly.

Esperanza questions the cruel randomness of fate, like the fact that she ended up on Mango Street, where she does not want to belong. Aunt Lupe is another trapped woman, though one of the only ones not trapped by a man in some way. Lupe represents a mythological seer in some ways, as she is blind and prophetic but mocked by others (which are typical traits and public receptions of seers in Greek myth).



The game the three girls were playing involved one of them imitating a person and then the other two having to guess who it was. Usually they picked famous people, but one day they decided to imitate Aunt Lupe. Esperanza doesn't know why, because they all liked her aunt. Esperanza then starts to reminisce – she used to bring books to Lupe and read them out loud. One day Esperanza whispered one of her own poems, a poem about wanting freedom. Lupe told Esperanza that she must keep writing, as it will keep her free. Esperanza returns to describing the game, and she reveals that Aunt Lupe died on the same day that they imitated her.

Lupe is the first person to connect Esperanza's love of writing with her desire to escape Mango Street. Esperanza's poem shows what is on her mind – becoming her own person and finding freedom – and Lupe offers a real solution and “prediction” that Esperanza can find freedom and identity through pursuing her writing. Lupe's death makes Esperanza look back and give more weight to her words, and only then does she realize Lupe's wisdom.



CHAPTER 24: ELENITA, CARDS, PALM, WATER

Esperanza gets her fortune read by Elenita the “witch woman.” Elenita works in her own kitchen with her two children at home, and the TV is on, and the furniture is covered in plastic. She gives Esperanza a glass of water and asks if she sees anyone's face in it, but Esperanza can only see bubbles. Elenita starts to cut the Tarot cards, but Esperanza is distracted by the Bugs Bunny cartoon in the background.

Time will later show that Lupe's “fortune” is true, but for now Esperanza seeks an easier solution. The description of the surroundings and Elenita's methods undercut Esperanza's hopefulness, and she is unable to buy into the “magic” even though she wants to.



Elenita takes Esperanza's palm and lays out the cards, and she sees jealousy, sorrow, and luxury. Esperanza wants to know if there is a house in her future, but Elenita only sees “a home in the heart.” Esperanza is disappointed that she spent her five dollars for this, and Elenita can tell, so she gives Esperanza some superstitious remedies for ailments. Elenita tries reading her fortune again, but once more she can only see a house in the heart. Esperanza leaves, disappointed.

Esperanza is disappointed by this fortune, but it might be more valuable than she thinks. Building a “home in the heart” – that is, a sense of selfhood and belonging that do not depend on external surroundings – will be stronger and safer than any physical building, and make Esperanza able to weather attacks of violence and shame like those she experiences.



CHAPTER 25: GERALDO NO LAST NAME

The chapter is mostly Marin answering questions from the police. At a dance that night she had met a young man named Geraldo, and they danced together. After he left, Geraldo was killed in a hit-and-run car accident. He spoke no English, and he died because only an intern was working in the emergency room that night, and no surgeon came to tend to him. Marin emphasizes how she didn't know anything about Geraldo, not even his last name.

This chapter offers more social criticism of the prejudice against Chicanos, as Geraldo is constantly emphasized as a “nobody,” not good enough to even be treated by a doctor when badly injured. In narrating the section, Esperanza emphasizes Geraldo's lack of English in affecting his fate, which shows that she is learning the powerlessness of lacking language.



Esperanza muses about Geraldo, who to the police and doctors was “just another wetback.” She imagines his life of shabby apartments and jobs, and how he left his home, and how his family back in Mexico will never know what happened to him.

Esperanza again shows that she is growing in her ability to empathize with others, and also that she now understands some of the racial prejudice she must overcome.



CHAPTER 26: EDNA'S RUTHIE

Ruthie is the only adult Esperanza knows who still likes to play like a child. Ruthie is the daughter of Edna, a mean woman who owns the apartment building next to Esperanza's house. Esperanza first met her when Angel Vargas was teaching the girls to whistle, and Ruthie suddenly appeared, whistling beautifully. Ruthie acts anxious when she goes shopping with the children, but she likes candy, and she "sees lovely things everywhere," like shapes in the clouds.

One night some of Edna's friends invite Ruthie to go out and play bingo, but Ruthie is anxious and paralyzed by the idea of leaving with them. Esperanza says that Ruthie is good at many things, but instead of getting a job she got married when she was young. Esperanza can't understand why Ruthie returned to live on Mango Street with her mother, but Ruthie says she is just waiting for her husband to come and take her away. But he never comes.

Ruthie loves books, but she can't read anymore because she gets headaches. She says she used to write children's books. Esperanza brings library books to Ruthie, and once she memorizes the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter" (from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*) and recites it to Ruthie. Ruthie is clearly moved by the beauty of the poem, but all she can say is that Esperanza has beautiful teeth.

Ruthie shows the childlike love of beautiful things that Esperanza and her friends have demonstrated before (which for them is a way of escaping, and improving their lives), but Ruthie is an adult, so her childishness is just another way of keeping her trapped. It is unclear when this anecdote takes place, as Angel Vargas, who fell and died, is still alive.



It is never explained whether Ruthie's stories about her own past are true or made up, but it's clear that she is another trapped woman of Mango Street, her potential squandered. Ruthie shares some of Esperanza's talents and creative spirit, but she lacks the strength to try to escape. Instead, her escape seems to be a kind of regression back into childhood. It's also suggested—but never confirmed—that Ruthie's childishness may come from some kind of intellectual disability or mental illness.



Esperanza is perhaps looking for more encouragement in her writing (as Aunt Lupe gave her), but Ruthie is unable to express herself properly after hearing the poem. This is another example of the power of language – Ruthie has poetic potential, but she cannot use it and so remains stuck, while Esperanza continues to grow.



CHAPTER 27: THE EARL OF TENNESSEE

Earl is another of Esperanza's neighbors. He lives in Edna's basement and works at night as a jukebox repairman. The children only see him when he comes out during the day to tell them to be quiet. He has two excitable black dogs (which leap "like an apostrophe and a comma"), and he speaks with a Southern accent. Sometimes he gives the children old records. Earl supposedly has a wife, and many of the neighbors have seen her enter his apartment, but they all describe her very differently. They only agree that Earl leads her quickly inside and they don't stay long.

Contrasted to Ruthie (and the other trapped women), Earl represents the sexual double standard of the neighborhood. He can do whatever he wants with as many women as he wants without being judged. Esperanza rather naively assumes the different-looking women entering his apartment are all actually his wife, but in fact they are probably different prostitutes. Esperanza's description of the dogs is surprisingly poetic, and shows she is getting stronger at making poetic connections and finding beauty among the ugly or mundane.



CHAPTER 28: SIRE

Sire is a neighborhood boy who Esperanza develops a crush on. She notices him looking at her as she walks by, and she tries to stare straight ahead and act unafraid. One day she looks back at him for too long, and she feels shaken by her emotions. Esperanza's parents say Sire is a "punk" and that she should avoid him.

Sire has a girlfriend name Lois. She is small and pretty with little pink toenails like "seashells," but she doesn't know how to tie her own **shoes**. Esperanza watches Sire and Lois walking together around the neighborhood, and Lois riding Sire's bike, and Sire tying Lois's shoes. Esperanza's mother says that Lois is the kind of girl that goes "into alleys," but Esperanza still wonders what it would be like to be Lois. Esperanza feels like "everything is holding its breath" inside of her, and she thinks about Sire, and a dream she had of being held by a boy.

Esperanza continues to sexually mature, and the conflict grows between her desire to be loved by men and her goal of becoming independent and autonomous. Sire represents a possible path for Esperanza – giving up her freedom for an early crush.



Lois's inability to tie her shoes – symbols of sexuality – shows her helplessness and insecurity. Esperanza dreams of being in Lois's place, but it is clear that Lois's attractiveness lies partly in her helplessness, and Esperanza is too strong to be attractive in that way to the men of Mango Street. Esperanza's mother's judgment of Lois' sexual activity contrasts with Earl's uncriticized promiscuity.



CHAPTER 29: FOUR SKINNY TREES

Esperanza describes the four skinny trees outside her house – she says they are the only ones who understand her, and she is the only one who understands them. Neither she nor they belong here on Mango Street, but they are stuck here. Yet both the trees and Esperanza have a secret strength and a continual anger, which is their reason to keep going. When Esperanza feels like giving up, seeing the trees comforts her, as they have grown despite the concrete, and they keep reaching upward no matter what.

Esperanza begins to develop her sense of self and find inner strength by noticing the beauty around her. She can find inspiration even in these skinny, ugly trees, and is able to empathize with them (a sign of writerly maturity) just as she earlier empathized with her father. She is getting stronger and is also able recognize her own growing strength.



CHAPTER 30: NO SPEAK ENGLISH

Mamacita is married to one of Esperanza's neighbors. Her husband worked hard to bring her and her baby to America. She is a huge woman, and when she emerges from the taxi for the first time she looks like an enormous flower. Once she arrives Mamacita never leaves the apartment, and she refuses to learn English. Some of the neighbors think she never leaves because she is too fat to get down the stairs, but Esperanza thinks it is because Mamacita is afraid of English. Esperanza's father told her that when he immigrated to the United States, he ate "hamandeggs" for three months because that was the only English word he knew.

Mamacita is not trapped so much by her husband as by her own insecurities. The other neighbors make fun of her appearance, but Esperanza realizes that the reason Mamacita won't leave the apartment is because of language, not her weight. Esperanza is beginning to understand the power of words, and part of this involves understanding the powerlessness of lacking words, like Mamacita or her father did.



Esperanza describes Mamacita sitting by the window all day, listening to Spanish radio and thinking about her pink house back in Mexico. Sometimes her husband gets angry and yells at her. A final heartbreak for Mamacita is when her baby boy starts to speak English, singing the song from a Pepsi commercial. Mamacita starts to cry and tells him “no speak English” over and over.

Like Esperanza, Mamacita spends much of her time dreaming of a house that she cannot have, but unlike Mamacita, Esperanza wants to work to achieve her dream. The baby's song shows that Mamacita cannot escape the pervasiveness of the English language.



CHAPTER 31: RAFAELA WHO DRINKS COCONUT & PAPAYA JUICE ON TUESDAYS

Rafaela is another neighbor of Esperanza's. On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband goes out to play poker and he locks Rafaela into their apartment. He is afraid she will escape because she is so beautiful. The apartment is on the third floor, and Rafaela leans out the window and listens to the music from the bar down the street. She wants to dance there while she is still young. Sometimes she drops a dollar out the window so Esperanza and the other children can go buy her a coconut or papaya juice, which they then send up on a clothesline. At the bar there are women older than Rafaela who can dance, flirt, and go in and out of apartments freely, but Esperanza muses that there is always someone with “sweeter drinks” who could trap them just like Rafaela is trapped.

Rafaela is yet another trapped woman, and another example of a possible path that Esperanza wants to avoid. Clearly Rafaela has given into her love of being desirable and sacrificed her freedom in doing so. Esperanza implies that even if Rafaela escaped her husband, she would only go to a bar and find another oppressive man. Esperanza's writerly voice grows stronger here, and she is able to understand more about the states of the women of Mango Street, as well as her own inner conflict between sexuality and autonomy.



CHAPTER 32: SALLY

Sally is a beautiful girl at Esperanza's school who wears “Egyptian” makeup, nylons, and short skirts. Esperanza wants to learn to wear makeup and to wear black suede shoes like Sally. Sally leans against the fence at school and tries to ignore the rumors boys tell about her. She had a best friend named Cheryl, but they got into a violent fight and now Sally leans on the fence alone. Esperanza wishes she could be Sally's new best friend.

Sally becomes an important figure for Esperanza, as she represents a kind of sexual maturity that Esperanza finds intriguing. Sally appears to have retained her autonomy while still being desirable to boys, and Esperanza wants to befriend Sally and learn her ways. Shoes again represent sexuality, as Esperanza envies Sally's black suede shoes.



Sally seems to diminish every day as she walks sadly home to her father. He tries to keep her trapped in the house because he is very religious and thinks her beauty means trouble. Esperanza thinks Sally is a beautiful dreamer who just wants to love and be loved, and she wishes Sally could go somewhere far away, somewhere she wouldn't have to worry about her father and cruel gossip.

Sally does not seem trapped by her sexuality, but by her abusive father. Esperanza romanticizes Sally, and it is clear that she is beginning to choose Sally's path, at least temporarily. Rachel and Lucy will rarely appear in the story anymore, as Esperanza tries to become Sally's best friend.



CHAPTER 33: MINERVA WRITES POEMS

Minerva is only slightly older than Esperanza, but she is already married and has two children. Her husband has left her, but sometimes he returns for a short while, only to break her heart again. At night after her children are asleep, Minerva writes poems on pieces of paper and then folds them up until they are tiny. She lets Esperanza read her poems, and Esperanza shares her own poems with Minerva. Minerva is sad all the time and her biggest problem is her husband. One time she kicks him out and he throws a rock through her window, but then he apologizes and Minerva takes him back. The next week she comes over covered in bruises and asks for Esperanza's advice, but Esperanza has no help to offer.

Minerva is the trapped woman most similar to Esperanza, and so shows a dangerous possible example of Esperanza's future. Minerva shares Esperanza's poetic instincts, but she has become trapped by a man and her young children. Most of the tragic women look out the window and dream of better things, but Minerva's husband throws a rock through her window, symbolizing that she has no means of escape, not even through poetry or dreaming. Esperanza at least realizes Minerva's plight, and sees that she must work hard to avoid it.



CHAPTER 34: BUMS IN THE ATTIC

Esperanza wants so badly to have a nice suburban house on a hill with a garden, like the ones where her father works. On Sundays the family visits these houses and imagines living in them, but Esperanza feels ashamed of her family looking so desperate on these trips, so she has stopped going. She imagines that people living so high up have forgotten about the poorer people below. Esperanza resolves to have a nice house someday but to never forget where she came from. When bums pass by, she will invite them in and let them stay in her attic, because she knows what it's like to not have a house. Her guests will think rats are squeaking in the attic, but Esperanza will happily tell them it's bums.

Esperanza begins to get more practical in realizing her goals – she no longer wants to just dream about a house, but to actually work and get one for herself. This chapter is also the first time that Esperanza promises to remember “where she came from.” Before, she just wanted to escape Mango Street and never return, but now (perhaps after describing all the trapped women) she realizes she must help those who aren't as strong as she is. She realizes the privileged world of the suburbs is unfair to people like her.



CHAPTER 35: BEAUTIFUL & CRUEL

Esperanza thinks that she is ugly and that her looks will leave her trapped at home. She thinks Nenny is prettier than she is, so Nenny has more options – Nenny wants a man to take her away, but she doesn't want to have a baby right away like Minerva's sister did. Esperanza's mother tries to comfort her by telling her she will get prettier as she gets older, but Esperanza has decided “not to grow up tame” like the rest. She wants to be like the women in the movies who are “beautiful and cruel.” These women make men love them but they never give up their own power. Esperanza is beginning this “quiet war” by leaving the dinner table like a man, without pushing in her chair or cleaning up her plate.

Esperanza tries to find a solution to her inner conflict (of sexuality versus autonomy) by becoming like a femme fatale of the movies – that is, being sexual and desired by men, but also retaining all her own power and agency. Her first act of this new “self” is humorously small, but also tragic in its own way – by refusing to wash her dishes, she is only making more work for another woman, in this case her mother. Things will only be fair when leaving the table “like a man” no longer means being irresponsible and negatively affecting other women.



CHAPTER 36: A SMART COOKIE

Esperanza's mother muses regretfully that she could have done something better with her life. She can speak two languages, fix a TV, sing opera, and draw, but she can't use the subway to get downtown. One day while cooking oatmeal she sings along with a *Madame Butterfly* opera record that she got from the library. Then she stops and warns Esperanza to stay in school and study hard – she needs to be able to take care of herself without a man. Esperanza's mother describes how when she was younger she quit school not because she wasn't smart enough, but because she was ashamed she didn't have nice clothes. She seems disgusted with her former self.

Esperanza still doesn't allow her mother to be a positive role model for her, simply because she is still stuck on Mango Street – she can't use the subway to escape. But Esperanza's mother is a positive force, and gives good advice here. Esperanza must not think she is more of a "smart cookie" than the other women, and she must take her mother's advice to remain independent and in school, or else she will end up married young and trapped like the other women of Mango Street.



CHAPTER 37: WHAT SALLY SAID

Sally admits that her father hits her, but she says that he never hits her hard. She comes to school bruised and scarred and says that she fell, but everyone knows the truth. Sally's father is afraid that she'll run away with a man and shame the family just like his sisters did. One time Sally tries asks to come and stay with Esperanza and her family. She brings over a bag of clothes and food from her mother, but that night her father knocks on the door, crying and apologizing. Sally goes back with him and everything is okay for a little while, but then one day Sally's father sees her talking to a boy and he beats her so badly she misses school for two days. Sally says he went crazy and forgot she was his daughter, and he switched from using his belt to using his fists.

Sally's father is one of the most oppressive male characters in the book, and the situation implies that Sally is trying to escape her abusive home life through sexual experimentation with boys. Esperanza still thinks this sexual experience is glamorous, and she doesn't connect Sally's horrible father with Sally's need to escape. Sally does inspire a feeling of protectiveness in Esperanza, as she tries to shelter Sally from pain and the outside world – but it turns out that this is the same sentiment that paradoxically and tragically leads her father to beat her.



CHAPTER 38: THE MONKEY GARDEN

A neighboring family with a pet monkey moves away, and the children of Mango Street take over the abandoned "**monkey garden**." It is full of beautiful, exciting plants and animals, and it becomes a magical place for Esperanza and her friends. It soon becomes a dumping ground for old cars and trash, but Esperanza is still intrigued by everything about the place, especially the way things seem to get lost there. The children start a legend that the monkey garden existed before everything else did.

The monkey garden becomes a symbol of the Garden of Eden in the Bible – a magical, perfect place where everything is innocent, but where something happens that causes a loss of innocence. The children's mythologizing of the garden becomes another form of escape through beauty and dreaming, as they use their poetic imaginations to try and improve their lives.



One day Esperanza, Sally, and some other kids are in the **monkey garden**. Esperanza wants to play with the younger children, but Sally stays on the curb talking to Tito and some other boys. The boys have stolen her keys, and they decide that Sally has to kiss all of them if she wants them back. Sally agrees and they all go behind an old car.

The "loss of innocence" moment begins as Tito and the other boys begin to play a more adult game in the garden. They see no problem in manipulating Sally for sexual favors, and she allows herself to be manipulated, as she has become accustomed to sex being her primary interaction and currency with men and lost hope for or even the understanding that there could be anything better.



Esperanza is very upset by this, but she can't explain why. She runs up to the apartment where Tito lives and tells his mother what is going on. Tito's mother just says "those kids" and says she can't do anything about it. Esperanza then leaves to protect Sally herself. She grabs three sticks and a brick and faces the boys. Sally and the boys all laugh at Esperanza and tell her to go home.

Esperanza runs away, ashamed, and hides under a tree in another part of the garden. She wishes she could melt away, and she tries to will her heart to stop beating. When Esperanza finally gets up again her own feet and **shoes** look foreign to her, and the **monkey garden** seems foreign as well.

Esperanza is upset at her own loss of innocence, but also how the women of Mango Street turn a blind eye to male oppression. The boys and men are able to act as they do because the women don't help each other, and when Esperanza does try to help, and puts herself in danger, Sally shames her.



The garden of beauty and safety has become unfamiliar to Esperanza, just as her own shoes (symbols of her sexuality) have. She feels confused and afraid and no longer knows where she belongs, as a child or a woman.



CHAPTER 39: RED CLOWNS

Esperanza addresses this section to Sally. Esperanza has just been sexually assaulted at a carnival, and her narrative is confused and disjointed. She was at the carnival with Sally, as she likes watching Sally laugh on the rides. Then Sally disappears with an older boy, and Esperanza waits for her by the red clowns. While she is waiting, a group of boys attacks Esperanza. She never describes exactly what happens, except that one boy forces her to kiss him and keeps saying "I love you, Spanish girl," but it's implied that she was raped. Esperanza helplessly repeats that the event is nothing like what happens in movies or books, or what Sally said sex is like. She is angry at Sally for abandoning her at the carnival, and angry at all the women in her life for not warning about things like this.

Esperanza does not blame her attackers for her rape, but instead is angry at Sally and the other women in her life. She lashes out at what she knows, as she is not strong enough to attack the world of oppressive men yet. Esperanza sounds especially childlike in this section, and it's clear that the terrible experience has shaken her to the core despite her growing maturity. It is now obvious that Sally is not a good friend to Esperanza, as she again abandons Esperanza for a boy's attentions. The anger directed at Sally and the other women implies that they are also complicit in such sexual violence when they do not help each other.



CHAPTER 40: LINOLEUM ROSES

Sally gets married before the eighth grade, to an older marshmallow salesman who has to take her to another state where their marriage is legal. She says she is in love, and she tells Esperanza about her house and the domestic objects she owns now, but Esperanza thinks she just got married to escape. Sally claims to be happy, and her husband sometimes gives her money, but he also gets angry and one time he kicked a hole through the door. He also won't let Sally go out on her own, or talk on the phone, or have her friends visit (except when he's at work), or even look out the window. Sally sits at home all day, looking around at the pretty things she owns.

Sally does manage to escape her father, but she finds a man who is just as oppressive. Looking out the window is the last hope and pleasure of many of the trapped women of Mango Street, but Sally's husband denies her even that. In one sense she is protected now, just as Sally's father and forced "protection" on her, but she has also given up every aspect of her freedom. She has a nice house like Esperanza dreams of, but it is not "a house of her own" – it is more like a cage.



CHAPTER 41: THE THREE SISTERS

There are some bad omens like a crying dog and a bird flying through a window, and Rachel and Lucy's baby sister gets sick and dies. The neighbors go in and out of Rachel and Lucy's house to view the body. Three old aunts arrive to visit the family, and Esperanza thinks they are intriguing and magical. She finds the wake unnerving, but the **three sisters** call her over and give her a piece of gum. They tell her "Esperanza" is a good name, and that she is special and will go far. They ask Esperanza to make a wish, and then they say it will come true.

One of the sisters pulls Esperanza aside and holds her face in her hands. The woman says that after Esperanza leaves the neighborhood, she must come back for those who cannot. She tells her that Esperanza "will always be Mango Street." Esperanza is amazed that the **three sisters** had guessed her wish, but she also feels ashamed for wishing something so selfish. Esperanza walks over to Lucy and Rachel, feeling dazed, and she never sees the old women again.

The three sisters contrast with Elenita the "witch woman" in that they actively seek out Esperanza and win her trust. They want her to accept her name – which she used to be ashamed of – and find strength within herself. The sisters represent the "Three Fates" of ancient mythology, women who decided births, deaths, and the lengths of lives. This mythological association makes their advice seem more important.



The story approaches the fantastical here (in Esperanza's point of view), as the sisters seem to read Esperanza's mind and predict her future. They recognize that Esperanza is already strong enough to leave Mango Street, but they remind her of what she thought in "Bums in the Attic," that she cannot forget where she came from, or abandon those left behind.



CHAPTER 42: ALICIA & I TALKING ON EDNA'S STEPS

Esperanza complains to Alicia that she doesn't have a house, while Alicia has a home back in Guadalajara that she will return to someday. Alicia points to the house on Mango Street, but Esperanza refuses to call it home. She shakes her head, trying to undo the year she has spent there. She repeats that she has no house except for one in her dreams. Alicia says "like it or not you are Mango Street," but Esperanza vows to never return until somebody makes Mango Street better. Alicia asks her who will make it better, and she suggests the mayor. Esperanza laughs at the absurdity of the mayor coming to Mango Street.

It is notable that Esperanza is spending time with Alicia now (who is studying and trying to leave) instead of Sally. Alicia also reiterates the words of the three sisters – Esperanza must remember who she is, come to terms with Mango Street, and return for the ones who need help. The absurdity of the mayor visiting Mango Street emphasizes the only way real change will happen – by people like Alicia and Esperanza leaving, becoming successful, and coming back.



CHAPTER 43: A HOUSE OF MY OWN

Esperanza describes the house of her dreams – it will not belong to a man, but only to Esperanza herself. It will have flowers, a porch, her books and stories inside, and her **shoes** by the bed. The house will be silent and safe, "clean as paper before the poem."

Esperanza brings together what she has learned and expands upon her dream. The house is her own now, with her own autonomous sexuality (her shoes) next to her own bed and her materials for reading and writing. Her house, like blank paper before the poem, will be something she will create.



CHAPTER 44: MANGO SAYS GOODBYE SOMETIMES

Esperanza explains that she likes to tell stories to herself. She makes stories about walking in her “sad brown shoes.” She says she is going to tell about a “girl who didn’t want to belong,” and then she repeats the parts of the first chapter about the other streets she has lived on. The house she remembers most is the house on Mango Street. She says that when she writes about the house, the writing sets her free a little bit. Esperanza knows that one day she will take her books and paper and say farewell to Mango Street, because she is too strong for it to keep her trapped forever. But she knows that even as she leaves, she will surely come back for the ones who are not strong enough to escape on their own, the ones “left behind.”

The style is more childlike in this section, and Esperanza repeats and rhymes phrases in a similar way to “The Family of Little Feet,” but now her ideas are much more mature. She has found that writing sets her free and helps build her identity – writing is the “home in the heart” that Elenita predicted. Esperanza also resolves to do what the three sisters and Alicia suggested – that is, leave Mango Street to become strong, and then return for the sad, trapped ones who cannot improve their lives on their own. Her strength is not just in escaping Mango Street, but in helping others who are still stuck.





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