

Name _____

Period _____

The House on Mango Street

Standards Focus: Literary Style—Novellas and Vignettes

The House on Mango Street is a novella, which is shorter than a novel. When compared to short stories, novellas are longer, with more conflicts and characters to develop. One definition requires a novella to be between 17,500 words and 40,000 words. Other novellas you might have heard of include *Of Mice and Men*, *Animal Farm*, and *A Christmas Carol*.

Instead of chapters, *House on Mango Street* includes vignettes (vin-YETS), brief descriptive writing pieces. In her vignettes, Sandra Cisneros describes the narrator, Esperanza, and her dreams, her family members and neighbors, and the neighborhood around Esperanza's home. Each vignette is like a photograph, full of sensory details to help readers feel and understand the message the author is trying to convey. The vignettes seem disconnected at first, but careful readers will notice a plot emerge as Esperanza relates her life and the lives of those around her.

In describing her concept of the book, Cisneros thought the reader “would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing like a necklace.”

1. What benefits or challenges do you see to reading a novella written in vignettes? Explain your answer on a separate piece of paper, using the facts from above.

In the introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros wrote about the writer she was before publishing it. (Note: Cisneros is talking about herself in the third person here.)

She wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children's nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Macondo, between the U.S. and Mexico. It's true, she wants writers she admires to respect her work, but she also wants people who don't usually read books to enjoy these stories, too. She doesn't want to write a book that a reader doesn't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding.

She thinks stories are about beauty. Beauty that is there to be admired by anyone, like a herd of clouds grazing overhead. She thinks people who are busy working for a living deserve beautiful little stories, because they don't have much time and are often tired. She has in mind a book that can be opened at any page and will still make sense to the reader who doesn't know what came before or comes after.

2. Do you know people who don't read in their free time? Based on Sandra Cisneros's opinions, what are a few reasons they might not read? Why does Cisneros think people should read her stories? Write your answers on your paper.

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Cisneros continues to write about the style she adopted for *House on Mango Street*:

She experiments, creating text that is as succinct and flexible as poetry, snapping sentences into fragments so that the reader pauses, making each sentence serve her and not the other way around, abandoning quotation marks to streamline the typography and make the page as simple and readable as possible. So that the sentences are pliant as branches and can be read in more ways than one.

3. With poetic writing, fragments and longer sentences, no quotation marks, do you think *The House on Mango Street* will be easy for you to read? Explain your reasoning with personal experience or the details from above. Write your answers on your paper.

In an interview she did with her publisher, Cisneros said she felt that *The House on Mango Street* has a particular draw for teenagers because Esperanza has some of the same questions they do.

I think that it speaks to young people's isolation, loneliness, and longing. . . . You basically have to invent [your list of possibilities] as you go, and you don't know who you're going to become yet. So you're looking around for models, as Esperanza is. She's looking at other women around her, saying, "I don't wanna go that way. I'm not going that way. But where do I go? Where do I fit? And how do I make myself into the person I want to be if I don't see that person I want to be?" I think that that's true for young people of any culture in their teens, when one day they still feel like a kid and the next day, you know, you've got the responsibilities of the adult.

4. Do you think young people are basically isolated and lonely? Are young people searching for role models? Do you agree that teens can be a kid one day and an adult the next? Respond to Cisneros's comments. Do you think a story like this is one you will like to read? Write your answers on your paper.

Cisneros characterizes her novella as a coming-of-age story, or a *bildungsroman*. In this type of book, a young main character has to learn about his or her world through observation and questioning, and this new education forces the character to make some surprising or uncomfortable realizations in order to become an adult. You may have read another *bildungsroman*, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, or *Ender's Game*. Can you think of any more?

5. Predict what kind of adult knowledge Esperanza may learn in *The House on Mango Street* that may cause her to mature and feel like an adult. Write your answers on your paper.

Interview Responses from "The House on Mango Street" – *The Story* on YouTube.com, KnopfGroup Channel <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Pyf89VsNmg>

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Please write your responses to the prompts about "Novellas and Vignettes."

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

