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## The Main Ideas Of The Novel The House On Mango Street By Sandra Cisneros

The novel, *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros is a coming of age story of a young Mexican-American girl named Esperanza Cordero. The story describes the events in Esperanza's life over a span of a year, in which she moves to a house on Mango Street. Although her new home is an improvement from her past residences, it is not the house she or her family dreams of and Esperanza struggles in her journey to belong in the society that comes with Mango Street. During her time on Mango Street, Esperanza learns to grow emotionally, sexually, and artistically from her experiences with the people in her life. She experiences the humiliation of poverty, the injustice of racism, and the beauty of poetry and music. As Esperanza goes through puberty and matures sexually, she becomes aware that most of her female neighbors are abused or oppressed by the men in their lives, which leaves her conflicted in wanting to escape her patriarchal society and wanting to be desired by men. Esperanza befriends a girl named Sally, who is very beautiful and overly sexual, but has an abusive father. Her friendship with Sally unfortunately leads to her most traumatic experience in the novel, as Sally leaves her alone at a carnival and Esperanza is raped. By the end of the novel, Esperanza still lives on Mango Street, but she has grown into a mature and confident young woman who is strong enough to leave Mango Street and its society behind. She is able to escape Mango Street emotionally through her writing and physically through education and financial independence. When Esperanza eventually leaves, she vows to return for those who are not strong enough to escape on their own.

From the start of the novel, Esperanza realizes that men and women live in separate worlds and that women are nearly powerless in her society. There is a continual conflict between being a sexual being and keeping one's freedom, as most of the female characters are trapped both by abusive husbands and needy children. Esperanza comes to recognize this opposition as she is caught between her own growing sexuality and her desire for freedom. Esperanza comes to the realization that she must become "beautiful and cruel," but she soon finds this impossible in the culture of Mango Street, as Sally is sexually manipulated by boys and Esperanza herself is sexually assaulted and raped. Most of the men in the novel try to take advantage of the women on a daily basis and the women rarely help each other. This is seen when Tito's mother ignores Sally's predicament with Tito and his friends and when Sally abandons Esperanza in the Monkey Garden and at the carnival. At the end of the book, when Esperanza imagines about returning for "the ones left behind," she is thinking of the helpless women of Mango Street. Cisneros uses the contrasting gender roles on Mango Street to reveal the patriarchal culture and rigid expectations of women in the society Esperanza is faced to grow up in.

Esperanza at the beginning of the novel already understands some of the gender inequality in her society, but for now it is innocent and confined to her siblings. She explains that, "The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours," (Cisneros 8). For example, her brothers, Carlos and Kiki, do not speak to Esperanza outside of the house just because she is a girl. Esperanza can only socialize with her sister, Nenny, who is too young to become her real friend. She dreams of having a best friend of her own one day which is an early manifestation of her goal for her own independence. Furthermore, Esperanza takes inspiration from her family history to challenge the gender roles in their society despite their

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cautionary tales of stagnation. Martin in her critical article observed that, "In Esperanza's family, mobile, autonomous women may attempt to live unbounded and unshackled, but they are destined to be tamed and remade as polished, delicate domestic ornamentation," (Martin 64). This observation proves the continuous and repetitive behavior of the society in which Esperanza is born into. However, despite the past, Esperanza is determined to change her destiny and set herself free of this patriarchal society.

A male dominated society on Mango Street is shown greatly through the role that Alicia plays. She 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 does not want to be stuck in a kitchen or factory her whole life. She stays up so late studying that she even sees the mice come out. Alicia's father says that the mice do not exist and that Alicia should be sleeping anyway, because it is a woman's job to wake up early and make tortillas. Alicia seems to be very similar to Esperanza in that 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.

In their journey to grow up and mature into women, Esperanza and her friends try on high heels and are amazed at how long and womanly their legs appear. They strut around the neighborhood and a man named Mr. Benny warns them, "They are dangerous, he says. You girls too young to be wearing shoes like that. Take them shoes off before I call the cops," (Cisneros 41). However, the girls ignore him and then the other boys and men make comments toward them, and a homeless man flirts with Rachel by asking her to kiss him for a dollar. Lucy becomes frightened by this encounter and makes all the girls go home. Lucy's mother eventually throws the shoes away, which leaves Lucy and Rachel secretly relieved. The dangers of the real world is fully revealed to the girls here as they are viewed as sexual objects by those who have physical and social power over them. Sugiyama in her article discussing how female feet and shoes are linked to romance and sexuality notes, "However, even in a relentlessly patriarchal society, women have a power over men which only the aging process can take away: the power to sexually arouse. That that girls are at least subconsciously aware of the power the female physique has over the male libido..." (Sugiyama 11). Although the girls feel empowered and sexual they are also overwhelmed with the fear of being over sexual and being taken advantage of. For now, the girls can discard their sexuality as easily as a pair of shoes, but soon Esperanza will have to deal with truly growing up, in her male dominated society and the pleasure she gets from being desired by men.

Esperanza and her family both want her to find a job, because her school is expensive and they need the money. She finds a job that is easy work, which involves matching negatives with prints, but Esperanza is uncomfortable with the social aspect of the job. She is afraid to eat in the lunchroom with everyone else, so she eats in the bathroom and takes her breaks in the coat room. One day an old man who works with Esperanza offers to eat lunch with her the next day. Esperanza feels less nervous around him, but then the man asks Esperanza for a kiss and says that it is his birthday. Esperanza goes to kiss his cheek, but then he grabs her face and kisses her hard on the mouth. She experiences the violent side of her potential sexuality here, as her innocent kiss turns into an assault by the old man. Esperanza begins to learn the sexual double standard of her society as she is becoming a woman, and most women are powerless on Mango Street.

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Sally is a beautiful and overly sexual girl at Esperanza's school who wears makeup and short skirts. Sally becomes an important figure in Esperanza's life because she represents a sexual maturity that Esperanza finds intriguing. Sally appears to have retained her independence while still being desirable to boys, and Esperanza wants to befriend Sally and learn her ways. After getting to know Sally, Esperanza notices that Sally seems to diminish every day as she walks sadly home to her father. He tries to lock her away in the house because he is very religious and thinks her beauty will lead to trouble. Esperanza thinks Sally is a beautiful dreamer and says, "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..." (Cisneros 82). Sally does not seem to be trapped by her sexuality, but by her abusive father. Esperanza glamorizes Sally and her lifestyle, and it is clear that she intends to follow Sally's path. Sally later confides in Esperanza that her father hits her, but she says that he never hits her hard. She comes to school covered in bruises and scars and tells people that she fell, but everyone knows the sad truth. Eventually, Sally's father apologizes to her and everything is okay for a little while, but then one day he beats her so badly she misses school for two days because he sees her talking to a boy. Sally says how he went crazy and that he switched from using his belt to using his fists. Sally's father is one of the most oppressive male characters in the novel, and that Sally is trying to escape her abusive father through her sexual encounters with boys. Esperanza still thinks this sexual experience is glamorous and she does not connect Sally's horrible father with Sally's need to escape.

One day Esperanza, Sally, and some other kids go into the monkey garden and Esperanza wants to play with the younger children, but Sally stays wants to talk to Tito and the other boys. The boys steal her keys and tells Sally that she has to kiss all of them if she wants them back. Sally goes along with their flirting and they all go behind an old car. The boys see no problem in manipulating Sally for sexual favors, and she allows herself to be manipulated because she is used to sex being her primary interaction and currency with men. Esperanza becomes very upset by this, but she cannot explain why. She runs up to the apartment where Tito lives and tells his mother what is going on and she just says she cannot do anything about it. Esperanza is upset about 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 do not help each other and when Esperanza does try to help, and puts herself in danger, Sally shames her.

Later when Sally and Esperanza go to the carnival, Sally disappears with an older boy and Esperanza waits for her by the red clowns. While she is waiting, a group of boys attack Esperanza. She never describes exactly what happens, except that once boy forces her to kiss him, but it is suggested that she was raped. Esperanza repeats that the event is nothing like what happens in movies or books, or how Sally said sex is like. She gets angry at Sally for abandoning her and then gets angry at all the women in her life for not preparing her for things like this. She lashes out because she knows that she is not strong enough to attack the world of oppressive men yet. Esperanza sounds very naïve in this section and it is clear that the traumatic experience has shaken her to the core. It is now obvious that Sally is not a good friend to Esperanza, as she again abandons Esperanza for a boy's attention. The anger Esperanza directs at Sally and the other women implies that they are also responsible for such sexual violence when they do not help each other.

The consistent struggle between being a sexual being and remaining an independent woman is faced by the majority of female characters on Mango Street as they are trapped by both their abusive husbands and their children. Esperanza slowly becomes more aware of the oppression

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of women in her patriarchal society as she grows into a maturing woman. Through her own experiences and those of the other women in her life, she learns about the exploitative and violent nature of men. Furthermore, the women on Mango Street rarely help each other in preventing and changing the social norms of their society. At the end of Esperanza's story, she declares that she will return to Mango Street one day to help the powerless women she is leaving behind. Cisneros tells a coming of age story of female oppression in a patriarchal society through the life of a young girl name Esperanza who must learn to find her own way to independence with little help of those in her life.

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