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COM 3300

31 July 2025

Conquering Life's Biggest Struggles: An Analysis of *The House on Mango Street*

Social identity helps explain the human want of belonging, and awareness of it rises through introspection. Critical theorist Brenda Allen describes the term in her book *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* as "...aspects of a person's self-image derived from group-based categories" (Allen 12). This definition does not refer to one's identity alone, but rather that very identity in relation to others. Think of popularity in high school, changes in wardrobe, or in speech. In Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*, the reader observes the protagonist, Esperanza, contemplating her upbringing. Born to a poor Mexican family residing on the south side of Chicago, she matures in troubling conditions which she refuses to accept. In this coming-of-age text—a story revolving around an adolescent navigating life—Esperanza identifies the ideologies that make up her world and critiques them. For further context, she is raised in a Catholic household and attends a private Catholic school, despite her low socioeconomic status. Her parents send her there because "...nobody went to public school unless you wanted to turn out bad" (Cisneros 53)—commentary made by her father suggesting daily adherence to religion is equivalent to quality education. In her culture, she notices women being the byproduct of a man's image, in addition to women being caught in the vicious cycle of young marriage, pregnancy, and mistreatment. However, Esperanza is determined to be the anomaly, with family members reminding her to pursue her writing in exchange for freedom. Because Esperanza recognizes the crudeness of gender norms and patriarchy in her neighborhood—strengthened by her culture—she is able to escape her living conditions, unlike many of the women in her community.

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In the beginning chapters, Esperanza catches a glimpse of the male dominance embedded in her surroundings. When discussing her name, she mentions that

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. (Cisneros 10)

The irony within this passage is thought-provoking. It suggests that 'wildness', as expressed in this quote, is a negative trait for women—not men. She has been conditioned to believe that being a horse woman is undesirable. The gender norms constructed by her heritage instruct women to be seen but not heard. She correctly interprets the preference of men not wanting their women strong as a threat to the patriarchy, and disagrees with that notion. Near the end of the quote, the reader witnesses Esperanza's recognition of this ideology—"...a set of assumptions and beliefs that comprise a system of thought" (Allen 33). Social institutions build ideologies and guide personal philosophy. Household, religion, and education are a few examples of this. The expression 'people are a product of their environment' is a theory closely related to that framework. It does not directly imply that a person is bound to the circumstances of their upbringing, but instead explains how a change in environment translates to a change in perspective. For Esperanza, neighbors and family awaken her to that shift.

Of the neighbors that Esperanza watches, Rafaela, Sally, and Minerva are seen crumbling as a result of abusive marriages. Sally also endures physical abuse by her religious father, whose

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rationale for a beating was because she talked to a boy. These are the horrors she hoped to evade, but to her surprise, this is how her life ends up:

Sally says she likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money. She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay. Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working. (Cisneros 101-102)

It bears mentioning that Sally married a marshmallow salesman before entering eighth grade, claiming she was in love with him. However, Esperanza was able to see through that declaration. Many of these women view marriage as a goal which has been promoted further by men and women in their culture. They end up married and pregnant at a young age, stay home, and often end up being abused by their husbands. Sally's circumstance is an accurate depiction of the way abuse works: a mix of extreme highs and lows, leaving the victim confused about whether to stay. Due to her unemployment, young age, and strained relationship with her family, she's in a challenging position to leave. After watching this experience repeat continuously, Esperanza understands how stuck these women really are. As demonstrated throughout the novel, there is a specific idea about how women should behave in the Latin community. Those who do not adhere to that idea are seen as promiscuous or not feminine. But Esperanza doesn't care about that. She doesn't care about tending to that narrative regarding how a woman should act. She knows that

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becoming educated is not common practice in the area she is from, but also knows that is what will set her free.

Speaking of becoming free, one of the moments that drives Esperanza to pursue her dreams is through the support of her Aunt Lupe. After Esperanza reads the poetry she wrote, her aunt urges her 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" (Cisneros 61). As the novel progresses, the reader notices Esperanza taking this suggestion more seriously. With all of the challenges she endures from being humiliated for her social class to being sexually assaulted, intersectionality certainly plays a role in the reason for that. Intersectionality refers to "...belonging to more than one nondominant group..." (Allen 20). In Esperanza's case, this is due to her being female, Mexican American, and of low socioeconomic status. Rather than succumbing to the adverse circumstances associated with the mistreatment of minority groups, she makes the best of what she can improve; her socioeconomic status. According to Brenda Allen, there are three pillars that comprise socioeconomic status: "...the combination of income, education, and occupation" (Allen 105). Esperanza, being a depiction of Cisneros in this novel, was able to check off one of the three at an early age. An additional catalyst reminding her to exceed her social class was within her immediate family.

Esperanza's mother—a stay at home mother assuming traditional roles, similar to most of the women in this novel—pushes Esperanza to have a life better than the one she has lived. After a moment of sadness, she preaches to Esperanza,

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I could've been somebody, you know? my mother says and sighs. She has lived in this city her whole life. She can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train to take to get downtown. I hold her hand very tight while we wait for the right train to arrive. (Cisneros 90)

This rumination emphasizes the intelligent woman her mother truly is, who happened to lose her dreams to the patriarchal system. This is undoubtedly a woman who commits herself to a family out of love and compassion, but both worlds could have been realities if it weren't for the external noise that affected her with time. This painful reflection is not unique to Esperanza's mother. The same argument could be made for Sally, Rafaela, and Minerva who all must have had dreams of their own. If these women did not center their lives around men to an enormous extent, they would likely be in healthier situations. But that's the thing about patriarchy, it's not their fault. Belonging to a culture that prioritizes it so heavily, they don't know anything else. The end of this passage reflects the small amount of the world her mother has actually seen. Not knowing how to get downtown tells the audience that this is a woman who rarely gets beyond her four walls. Her husband is able to experience the outside world because he is working, but she on the other hand is isolated because she has a family to take care of. The question becomes, is that truly a partnership? As a couple, can they positively say that they've explored the same adventures together? This is a decision that every woman must make individually. As Esperanza matures, she decides that her mother's life is not one she wishes to live.

The House on Mango Street is a touching story not because of extraordinary twists in some foreign universe, but because it's a reflection of the obstacles faced by every individual in

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every part of the world. There is a theme for everyone to relate to: class, race, gender, sexuality, and more. But what is more interesting is how someone who even belongs to the dominant groups can somehow relate. That is because struggle does not solely exist within those groups, but the struggle also exists within the human mind. It exists within two words: identity and belonging. Those are two profound words which raise the most existential questions. What is incredibly admirable is that Esperanza, despite her tender age, overcomes the battle in her mind along with marginalization. It was tough for her to grow up in an environment where not everyone respects her simply because of her nationality or the street she grew up on. It was tough watching women she loves be devalued by society because they believed their duty is to men and children. And it was tough to witness her mother, a woman she cares for so deeply, admit that there is an alternative life out there that she should have experienced. It takes tremendous intellect to recognize that nearly every opportunity these women could have seized was taken away by a man, or the teachings of one. However, it was those hardships combined with her resilient mindset and encouragement from others that led her to freedom on the other side.

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Works Cited

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