



The Politics of Gender in The House on Mango Street

Curriculum Unit 99.01.02
by Angela Beasley-Murray

Who is this unit designed for?

What is reading anyway?

What is *The House on Mango Street* about and why would I use this book for the unit?

What pre-reading strategy is good?

Don't forget I teach reading!

Match the meaning.

What myths are used to feminine gender roles in society?

What passages are relevant and are the most important?

Who is this unit designed for?

This unit is designed for students who are in high school. The unit will contain ideas that are high interest and age appropriate. Students placed in this class have tested at 6th grade and below on the TAP test. While the reading material is not complex, the discussions are aimed at students who are sophisticated through experience. Students who can learn best from listening and discussing will benefit. Students in this class usually have short attention spans and prefer instant gratification. The classes must move quickly. Immediate feedback and response to each student is necessary. These classes contain fifteen students. I challenge these students to think with higher level thinking skills and to feel comfortable with ambiguity.

I have taken seriously the challenge of the standardized tests that students must take at the end of the sophomore year. The unit addresses a variety of learning styles. The Connecticut Academic Performance Test has now added the reading supplemental test that looks for the best and most relevant answers to the text they introduce. The challenge is to these students not to answer quickly but concentrate and engage long enough to give a careful response. The CAPT also requires the student to communicate through open ended

response. The CAPT and TAP require the students to have a grasp of general knowledge as well to as analyzes literature.

What is reading anyway?

Reading requires more than the ability to utter aloud written or printed words. The skills to make an observation, to discover the meaning clues are necessary. A person must recognize, interpret, and attribute meaning to the written word. All of these attributes are required to be fully involved in the process of reading.

Reading as a subject in high school should include reading for information, reading a persuasive text, and reading the narrative text. Each style of reading requires different reading strategies.

What is the *House on Mango Street* about and why would I use this book?

The House on Mango Street is written in 1984 by Sandra Cisneros. Cisneros was herself a teacher in an urban school in the Latino section of Chicago. The novel as a work of fiction is believable and real. The House on Mango Street provides connections to current social issues regarding economics for the family who has little financial resources. Many examples are provided through the eyes of the characters concerning social issues for youth such as dating, marriage, women's roles and expectations. Many questions are asked concerning interpersonal relationships.

The House on Mango Street is delightfully written, and students will chuckle at some of the descriptions of events found in the short vignettes. Students who have lived in situations where they have moved many times and have experienced the insecurity of not owning their own home may find this novel easy to relate to. The life challenges are realistic for the young female character. The vocabulary is not challenging. The sentences flow and serve as a good model for speech and writing structure.

Examining *The House on Mango Street* for the politics of gender provides mystery and suspense. The discovery of secret and underhanded schemes that cause faction within a family, referring mainly to father/daughters, men/women, is at the center of this unit. Are there principals and opinions that prevent communication among individuals and cause heartbreak conflict? Does this struggle result in covert maneuvers by the men and the women?

To consider the "politics" of gender I broaden a student's comprehension of the meaning of politics. What initially comes to mind is the use of the word referring to government/group struggles. I could use the word to refer to peer groups. Now that the courts have decided that teachers are responsible for reporting sexual harassment *The House On Mango Street* could be used to further define sexual harassment.

The fact that *The House on Mango Street* uses Latino names and some descriptions of Latino culture adds to and enriches the purpose of the unit. Cultural comparisons are possible and indeed contributes to our understanding of the universality of human nature. Later in the unit the Chinese marriage laws are also included so that they may be looked at to compare how the woman has been treated in many cultures in different circumstances by the rule of law.

The House on Mango Street provides and opportunity to examine individual response as well as the power politics between men and women. Students will have the opportunity to confront stereotyping, profiling and

labeling. Students will develop flexibility when solving problems. The denial of the individual through labeling and profiling can cut off thinking and promote over simplifying of a problem. Currently profiling which is the scientific listing of descriptions of characteristic attributed to an individual is being challenged in the courts.

Students who need instant gratification can read a vignette and feel they have completed a story. The novel moves quickly and every student can be asked to read a vignette to the class with confidence that they will be successful.

The selection *The House on Mango Street* fulfills the following criteria:

- the style is vignettes
- the vocabulary is simple
- the pages are quick to read
- the book moves quickly
- the vignettes are good stories when read orally (mini-case studies)
- there is opportunity to explore interpersonal communication and social development
- students can read the story orally with confidence

I will use “The Politics of Gender in *The House on Mango Street*” to recognize cause-effect, fact opinion comparison-contrast, main idea, and supporting ideas as is played out in the struggle in the family. To discuss sex role stereotyping will develop awareness of personal interactions. Profiling will be used to investigate for roles. Students will be asked to make connections and to interpret information. Students will identify their own opinion. Students will learn to value their own opinion. Students will have an opportunity to express opinions orally and in writing.

I am keenly interested in the role that gender plays in culture and how it affects the family structure. The Latino expectations of men and women will be examined.

What myths are used to define gender roles in society?

By the time students have reached high school, they have already observed and experienced sex role stereotypes and begin to cast themselves and others into such roles. Pressures to conform to these roles are in place.

It will be important to ask students to think in terms of the following social science observations of women. One of my favorite books that I have referred to for definition and clarity is David Augsberger’s *Pastoral*

Counseling Across Culture. I am using this source because I feel that he has done a good job of examining women's roles around the world. He has a succinct list that he has used and it will be helpful to review his. Augsberger makes the following statement: "A cultural universe divided by sex is imperative. Psychological traits are viewed as sex linked certainties, forever separating masculine and feminine roles, talents and temperaments. The body fixes the limits of the should. The social distance between the sexes is conceived as an integral part of the human condition"(224).

Augsberger further asserts: "The oppression of women is inextricably bound up with the world system of sexploitation. Women bear the heaviest burden of national, economic, class, and religious oppression. They are often told their own liberation must wait for the attainment of the whole society's liberation"(224).

In order to truly address political issues of gender we must consider some of the sex role stereotypes. According to Augsberger "Cross Cultural Comparisons of Women's Roles," these assumptions are widely made by societies (224).

Women are biologically unable to do certain work.

Women choose submissive roles and prefer to be dominated.

Women possess an essentially maternal instinct, primarily expressed in love for sons rather than daughters.

Women's lives, roles and opportunities are circumscribed and limited.

Women are universally subordinate to men.

Women are comparatively powerless.

Augsberger challenges and refutes these sex role stereotypes by collecting data from many cultures. The data he uses supports the following opposition to the above role stereotypes:

Sex, reproduction and child rearing do not preclude women from hard physical labor, complex commercial dealings, or artistic creativity.

Women of traditional societies are not acquiescent, subservient, and passive but are active, claim rights, and resent male dominance.

In traditional societies few alternatives are available to either males or female, although women are more contained in the domestic sphere.

The degree of subordination of women varies least in a small scale tribal societies.

Women wield a great deal of power. In many societies they constitute a major labor force, exercise full control of domestic resources, provide much of the subsistence and influence, underwrite, and facilitate the more prestigious activities of their men. Furthermore Augsburgberger quotes Rafael Patai who suggests the tentative working hypothesis that seems well supported by available data: The greater the distance between the status of the lower and high classes, the greater the inequalities of men and women, and visa versa" (223).

Augsburger also states that "Sexual roles are shaped not only by tradition by the economic, agricultural, and technological needs of society. As this changes, there are also alterations in both expectations and possibilities for women and men" (223).

It is important not to forget the recent history for women within the last century in the United States. Women have earned the right to vote. Women have fought for the right to have flexibility in the workplace. Women have taken to the political stage the right to have control of their bodies concerning reproduction.

Social scientists have provided a world view of women. This world view has inspired women to think their potential differently and to challenge their "place" in society.

What pre-reading strategy is good for The House On Mango Street??

One of the goals for reading is to develop self-monitoring skills. Students should participate in the goal setting and expectations for their evaluation for this project. Students will develop a realistic time frame for their goals. The teacher will supervise and make sure these goals are realistic and challenging for the student. Each student at our school has a student planning book.

Students will develop a list of questions about The House on Mango Street.. The student will answer their own questions for him/herself. What do students already know and feel about sex roles? What are the expectations for themselves in their relationships?

Don't forget I teach reading!!!

I put a great emphasis on prefixes, root words, suffixes and syllables. I enthusiastically look up the simplest of words to grasp the profound meanings!!! I am presupposing that the student has already had my unrelenting emphasis on how to break down a word.

Pronounce words.

Look up in dictionary.

Spell.

Place in alphabetical order.

Underline the root word.

Circle prefix and suffix.

I have chosen the following vocabulary to practice phonetic word skills and strengthen vocabulary. I chosen these words because the words are concepts and abstract. These words are used in other disciplines. The vocabulary is used many times in the media making the words relevant. The abstract concepts these words represent broaden the understanding of conflict in The House On Mango Street.. I am not using dictionary definitions so that students can apply meaning of the dictionary definitions.

Match the Meaning

politics femininity
dependent vignette
stereotype independent
gender profile
love bigamy
abuse concubine
prejudice

1. _____ power between people, government
2. _____ able to function on your own
3. _____ more than one wife (lots of syllables)
4. _____ needs someone or something
5. _____ a scene or a literary sketch
6. _____ more than one husband/wife
7. _____ divided according to sex
8. _____ type according to pattern
9. _____ judge according to pattern
10. _____ mistreatment
11. _____ ladylike
12. _____ lives with a man without being married
13. _____ a graph or a table representing numerically the extent to which a person or thing shows tested characteristics.
14. _____ to like or desire enthusiastically, fondness. Students will do the following activities:

Describe what it is like to move from one location to another.

List all of the practical challenges such as change of schools, making new friends, finding new bus routes, etc.

As game they can think of all the possibilities. Divide into teams and see who can come up with the most possibilities.

What are their expectations for themselves, do they want to buy or rent a home.

Engaging students to search for the “why “ and “how” will increase reading comprehension. Students will be able to attribute meaning and make the reading meaningful. There is opportunity for observation and interpretation. While the story moves quickly it is important to stop and reflect on the vignettes. There are several obvious issues and relevant topics that can be researched, discussed, debate. There are several essays that will be written. I have included a student bibliography for the purpose of further research and discussions. These books are found in our school library and are at the reading level of these students. Students may check these books out write one page summary and present these summaries for class discussion.

What is love?

Describe the relationship between men and women on Mango Street.

What is your idea of a good relationship between men and women?

Describe the cycle of violence.

What passages are relevant and are the most important?

I have chosen passages from the House on Mango Street that I consider to be important. the passages will be directly related to issues to be emphasized. The passages will be followed by activities that will proved connections between the novel and the students experience. The integration of disciplines will be found in the following activities.

Vignette #1 (Page 10)

My Name

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, men don't like their women strong. Students can use the following information to discuss their idea of what it must have been like for women in China prior to 1950.

Students will use the following for reading, response, reaction and evaluation. Students will decide for themselves if it is bad luck to be born female in China as they read the following selections. Ask students to write their evaluation.

Elizabeth Croll describes the evolving identities of women in China. China is a very large country and contains varying attitudes. The following poem in her book describes an attitude that has long been a part of China's culture.

Daughter Order

When a son is born
Let him sleep on the bed
Clothe him with fine clothes
And give him jade to play with
How Lordy his cry is!
May he grow up to wear crimson
And be the lord of the clan and the tribe.

When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground
Wrap her in common wrappings
And give her broken tiles for play things
May she have no faults, no merits of her own
May she well attend to food and wine
And bring no discredit to her parents (Croll, 32).

The Marriage Laws of the People's Republic of China adopted by the Central People's Government Council at its 7th meeting April 13, 1950 provides a concrete contrast between two views. The views regarding women before 1950 and the views regarding women after 1950. There are Sixteen articles regarding marriage. I am

including just a few. (Flemming Christiansen and Shirin Rai, 277)

The General Principles

“Article 1. The feudal marriage system based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the supremacy of man over woman, and in disregard of the interests of the children, is abolished”(277).

“The New-Democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children, is put into effect” (277).

“Article 2. Bigamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference in the re-marriage of widows, and the exaction of money or gifts in connection with marriages, are prohibited” (277).

Further attitudes about women can be examined by looking at the infanticide in China. Infanticide has long been a human rights issue in China. Tahirin V. Lee has included The Spheres of Exchange and Spheres of Law: Identity and Power in Chinese Marriage Arrangements in his book (254)

“You must not tell anyone”, my mother said, “what I am about to tell you”. “In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into a family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as she had never been born “ (254).

“Infanticide is the deliberate killing of a child in China in its infancy and includes death by neglect...Because there are few cases of preferential male infanticide as a universal social policy female infanticide is a reflection of the deadly consequences of cross-cultural domination of patriarchal values and culture” (254).

Compare the marriage and divorce laws of the United States with the marriage and divorce laws of the People’s Republic of China.

How are they similar and how are they different?

Vignette # 2 (Page 26)

Marin

Marin says she’s going to get a real job downtown because that’s where the best jobs are, since you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away...Marin is waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life.

This vignette provides the opportunity for values clarification activity so that the student can reflect on their own system of importance. Students will have an opportunity to talk about their values as they play the following game. Give the students \$5000 of play money. Each of the following values are to be bid upon. The teacher or class recorder will keep a record on the bids. Some values may take all of their money. Some values will cost less than others. There is no winning or losing except to the highest bidder. To one person one value is important and to another value is important. It is important not to place judgment on choices. When the students have spent their money ask them to explain why they chose what they did and why they spent their money the way they did. What do they hope to gain by choosing the value?

Are there any values on this list that are more important to one gender than the other?

Ask students to assign a dollar value to the following values. No more than \$5000 for any one value.

Ask the students to read the words, give meaning, and how they would feel if they possessed the following list of words.

Are any of these values more important to women than to men?

loyalty	family	children	friendship
love	peace	fame	success
security	popularity	fortune	health
honesty	hope	good grades	intelligence
happiness	good time	free time	education

Vignette #3 (Page 29)

There was an old woman she had so many children she didn't know what to do.

Rosa Vargas' kids are too many and too much. It's not her fault you know, except she is their mother and only one against so many.

This is a good point to ask the students to question their own stereotypical thinking and to develop flexibility. I think there is tension for youth to live between the ideal of what they would like have happen and reality.

Ask students to divide into small groups. Think of responsibilities of bringing up a child that they can think of. Then have students take a sheet of paper and fold the sheet in half. On one side of the paper write: "What is the role of a mother in a child's life?" Then on the other side write: "What is the Role of a father in a child's life." Now decide which responsibility belongs to the mother and which belongs to the father. If the father or mother is not in the home what happens? Is it possible for the single parent to fulfill both of these roles. If so how? List the problems. How does it feel to be responsible for being both mother and father? Do you think a child suffers any consequences? If so what consequences? What role does the community play in a child life? What resources are their available to a single parent? Ask students to look in the phone book and find at least five places that can be called for help.

Vignette #4 (Page 31)

Of Alicia who sees mice .

Close your eyes and they'll go away, her father says, or you are just imagining. And anyway, a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hid behind the sink...she is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers.

Have students close their eyes and visualize a vignette.

Draw a picture of two or more scenes.

Students could write and role-play a couple of the sentences.

Students could re-write two of the vignettes to provide a different ending.
Discuss what is experienced when a person is not heard or acknowledged.
Observe the voice of someone who does not feel heard in a dialogue. What does that feel like?
Ask students what it is like for them when no one listens to them.
Rank their responses on a scale of one to ten. One is the lowest response and ten each side of the paper. Anger? Not worthy etc.

Vignette #5 (Page 59)

Born Bad

But I think diseases have no eyes. They pick with a dizzy finger anyone, just anyone.

Take a sheet of paper and fold in two.

On one side of the paper put the heading "What people can control in their lives."

On the opposite side of the page write "What people have no control over."

Make a list for each side of the paper.

Then place lists in paragraphs.

Take the paragraphs and write a paper in essay style.

Give the paper title.

Vignette #6 (Page 92)

What Sally Said.

He never hits me hard. She said her mama rubs lard on all the places were it hurts. Then at school she'd day she fell.

Describe the cycle of violence

Research domestic violence.

Invite a police officer or social worker to have class discussion.

Research the following topics in books in your library. There is a list of relevant books found in the student bibliography. Discuss orally. In small groups answer the questions on paper. Present the paper to the class in a manner organized by the students.

“What is love?” “What is need”? Are the two related?

What is domestic violence?

What is the dynamic in a violent relationship?

What are the community resources for people being violated?

Vignette #7 (Page 108)

A house of my own.

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. 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. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after.

What is being described?

What feeling is being expressed?

Could she have gained control without having her own house? If so, how?

Lesson Plan Day 1

Linoleum Roses (Page 101)

She got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same...She says she likes being married because she gets to buy 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...She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own.

Activity

Debate the pros and cons of the following questions.

Should people get married? Why and why not?
Do you believe in marriage? Why and why not?

If the students understand the rules for formal debate make it formal. If they have not had the experience of formal debate divide into two groups. One of the groups should take the pro position and the other the con position.

Ask students to read the following ideas concerning marriage. Consider the best option for yourself. Add to the list of options. Ask students to describe what they would consider to be an ideal marriage. What elements do you believe would make a good marriage?
A marriage where the man and the woman talk together and decide which person is responsible for what according to their interest and abilities.
A marriage where the roles change as the two individuals change.
Do you believe that one person should make the decisions based on which sex they are?
Should decision making be shared? Or is the woman subject to the man? What is the man goes crazy?

Skills

Analytical skills
Reflection on values
Verbal expression, valuing their own opinion
Listening to other opinion while valuing their own

Evaluate

Thoroughness of arguments
Individual conduct during debate

Lesson Plan Day 2

Linoleum Roses (Page 101)

...and she married before the eighth grade. She has her husband and her house now, her pillow chases and her plates. She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape.

Activity

What problems and conflicts did she the character escape?

What problems and conflicts do you think she may now encounter marrying in the eighth grade?

What do you think is the apposite age to marry and why?

Do you think she describes tragedy?

Do you think she describes romance?

What is the mood of the character and vignette?

What are her character traits?

Skills

Brainstorming

Organizing thoughts

Writing

Evaluation

Lesson Plan Day 3

What Sally said. (Page 92)

They are bad those Vargases, mad how they can help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning bottling and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar for bologna or a note explaining how come.

The kids bend trees and bounce between cars and dangle upside down from knees and almost break like fancy museum vases you can't replace. They think it's funny. They are without respect for all things living, including themselves.

He never hits me hard. She said her mama rubs lard on all the places where it hurts. Then at school shed say she fell. That's they where all the blue places come from. That's why her skin is always scarred...he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt. You are not my daughter.

Activities

Close your eyes and envision the scene of the child on his own.

Define the problem.

What kind of parenting is used in the "What Sally said" passage?

What was the experience of the mother that was left with all of the responsibility the children?

What was experience for the individual child to have the mother left with all of the responsibility of the children?

Make a list of the problems for single parents. Do orally and record lists on blackboard

Find solutions to each problem named. Do orally and record on the blackboard).

Ask students can form paragraphs.

Write two paragraphs on "Good parenting/Bad parenting".

Skills

Analytical Skills.
Recognizing personal values.
Focusing and concentrating through writing.

Evaluation

The number and quality of the ideas.
Length of paper.
If the student communicated engagement with the topic

Student Bibliography

All of the books listed in this bibliography have been written for student this unit designed to serve.

Bender, David and Leone, Bruno. Male/Female Roles; Opposing Viewpoints. Greenhaven Press, 1995.

Written at a level the student can read without difficulty. This book can contribute to understanding the issues involved when considering men and women roles that have been traditional.

Cisneros, Sandra. The House On Mango Street. Vantage Books, 1984.

A novel written boy a girl who lives in The House on Mango Street..

Cohen-Posey. How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies. Rainbow Books Inc., 1994.

An advice book in handling people who do not respect others. Again written on a level this targeted reading group can enjoy. This book is to help the student understand boundaries and become more sensitive to bullying in personal relationships. The book provides suggestions in handling bullying.

Greenberg, Keith. Family Abuse; Why do people Hurt Each Other? Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1994.

Written for the level of reader this unit is designed for. It can help them on their essay on love.

Grosshandler, Janet. Coping with Verbal Abuse. The Rosen Company Group. 1989.

The book is designed to help students recognize and deal with verbal abuse.

Silverstein, Herma. Date Abuse. Enslow Publishers, Inc, 1994.

A book that will help students understand abuse in personal relationships. This book addresses a definition that is related to potential marriage problems.

Bibliography

Augsberger, David W. *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1976.

This book provides an anthropological view of three areas East-West and the nine major world religions. It gives a fair study of various areas. However it does have a bias but is fair non-the-less.

Anselmi, Dina L. and Law, Anne L. *Question of Gender, Perspectives and Paradoxes*. Boston: McGraw Hill. 1998.

This book covers the question of gender from every angle and does a thorough, detailed study of the question of gender. It is an excellent resource.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books. 1984.

A novel about one girl's experience while living in The House On Mango Street..

Croll, Elizabeth. *Changing Identities of Chinese Women*. London and New Jersey: Hong Kong University Press. 1995.

Excellent resource to trace the evolving history of women's experience in China.

Fleming Christiansen and Rai, Shirin. *Chinese Politics and Society: An Introduction*. New York: Prentice Hall. 1996.

A very good overview of the recent politics of China and presents a recent political history.

Lee, Tahirih V. *Law, the State, and Society in China*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc. 1997.

This is a book that contains a collection of law reviews. There are articles specifically on marriage and family. The article I used was from the Columbia Human Rights Law Review Vol 23: 249 contained in Mr. Lee's collection.

Sue, Derald W. *Counseling the Culturally Different, Theory and Practice*. New York: Wiley. 1981.

This book is written by an American Indian and discusses culture as it relates to the individual, and the individual to the Indian, Black, Asian, and White cultures. It speaks of the damage that can be done if a counselor is not culturally literate and aware of his/her own prejudice.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>