Before You Read

Straw into Gold: The Metamorphosis of the Everyday



Meet **Sandra Cisneros**

(born 1954)

Sandra Cisneros is one of the most distinctive voices in American literature today. Born in Chicago to a Mexican American mother and a Mexican father, Cisneros spent her childhood living uncomfortably between two worlds. The family frequently traveled to Mexico for extended periods of time. Each time they returned to the United States, the family would settle in a new location and at a new school in Chicago's *barrios*. The frequent moves made it difficult for Cisneros to make friends. Being the only girl in a family of brothers did not help either, as she was often left out and overlooked.

"You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are."

—Sandra Cisneros

Because she was shy, she was often lonely. But, Cisneros writes, "that loneliness . . . was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself." In high school, a teacher helped Cisneros nurture her love of writing. After high school, Cisneros received a scholarship to Loyola University in Chicago. She graduated in 1976 with a bachelor's degree in English and went on to the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. At the Writers' Workshop, Cisneros felt keenly aware of her status as an outsider.

Finding Her Voice Yet, it was at the Iowa Writers' Workshop that Cisneros found her voice. She realized that the very thing she had tried to escape—the shame and separation of being different—made her unique. She knew then that her role as a writer was to depict the loneliness, isolation, tragedies, and triumphs of the outsider.

Mango Street In 1982 Cisneros received her first National Endowment for the Arts grant, which allowed her to write full-time. Two years later, she published her breakthrough work, *The House on Mango Street*, a series of vignettes about a young girl, Esperanza, growing up in a Chicago *barrio*. The stories, a blend of fiction and poetry, echo Cisneros's own youth and her yearning to make sense of her life in relation to her surroundings.

After the success of her first work, Cisneros went on to publish other works of fiction: *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991) and *Caramelo* (2002). She has also published two collections of poetry, including *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987).

In 1995 Cisneros received a MacArthur Fellowship—a prestigious monetary award known as the "genius grant." The award is an official acknowledgement of her permanent status in the American literary world.

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STRAW INTO GOLD

The Metamorphosis of the Everyday

Sandra Cisneros



Women Making Tortilla Dough. Diego Rivera. Fresco. Court of Labour. Ministry of Public Information, Mexico.

When I was living in an artists' colony in the south of France, some fellow Latin-Americans who taught at the university in Aix-en-Provence invited me to share a home-cooked meal with them. I had been living abroad almost a year then on an NEA grant, subsisting mainly on French bread and lentils so that my money could last longer. So when the invitation to dinner arrived, I accepted without hesitation. Especially since they had promised Mexican food.

What I didn't realize when they made this invitation was that I was supposed to be involved in preparing the meal. I guess they assumed I knew how to cook Mexican food because I am Mexican. They wanted specifically tortillas, though I'd never made a tortilla in my life.

It's true I had witnessed my mother rolling the little armies of dough into perfect circles, but my mother's family is from Guanajuato; they are *provincianos*, country folk. They only know how to make flour tortillas. My father's family, on the other hand, is *chilango*[1] from Mexico City. We ate corn tortillas but we didn't make them. Someone was sent to the corner tortilleria to buy some. I'd never seen anybody make corn tortillas. Ever.

1. *Chilango* (chē län′gō) is a Mexican slang term that means "native to Mexico City."

Somehow my Latino hosts had gotten a hold of a packet of corn flour, and this is what they tossed my way with orders to produce tortillas. *Así como sea.* Any ol' way, they said and went back to their cooking.

Why did I feel like the woman in the fairy tale who was locked in a room and ordered to spin straw into gold? I had the same sick feeling when I was required to write my critical essay for the MFA[2] exam—the only piece of noncreative writing necessary in order to get my graduate degree. How was I to start? There were rules involved here, unlike writing a poem or story, which I did **intuitively**. There was a step by step process needed and I had better know it. I felt as if making tortillas—or writing a critical paper, for that matter—were tasks so impossible I wanted to break down into tears.

Somehow though, I managed to make tortillas—crooked and burnt, but edible nonetheless. My hosts were absolutely ignorant when it came to Mexican food; they thought my tortillas were delicious. (I'm glad my mama wasn't there.) Thinking back and looking at an old photograph documenting the three of us consuming those lopsided circles I am amazed. Just as I am amazed I could finish my MFA exam.

I've managed to do a lot of things in my life I didn't think I was capable of and which many others didn't think I was capable of either. Especially because I am a woman, a Latina, an only daughter in a family of six men. My father would've liked to have seen me married long ago. In our culture men and women don't leave their father's house except by way of marriage. I crossed my father's threshold with nothing carrying me but my own two feet. A woman whom no one came for and no one chased away.

To make matters worse, I left before any of my six brothers had ventured away from home. I broke a terrible **taboo**. Somehow, looking back at photos of myself as a child, I wonder if I was aware of having begun already my own quiet war.

I like to think that somehow my family, my Mexicanness, my poverty, all had something to do with shaping me into a writer. I like to think my parents were preparing me all along for my life as an artist even though they didn't know it. From my father I inherited a love of wandering. He was born in Mexico City but as a young man he traveled into the U.S. vagabonding. He eventually was drafted and thus became a citizen. Some of the stories he has told about his first months in the U.S. with little or no English surface in my stories in *The House on Mango Street* as well as others I have in mind to write in the future. From him I inherited a sappy heart. (He still cries when he watches Mexican soaps—especially if they deal with children who have forsaken their parents.)

2. *MFA* stands for Master of Fine Arts—an academic degree.

Quests and Encounters *Why does Cisneros use this particular analogy?*

Analyze Text Structure *Explain how the essay has been structured so far.*

Thesis *At this point in the essay, how do you think that this statement might relate to Cisneros's main idea?*

Vocabulary

intuitively (in to͞o′ə tiv lē) *adv.* knowing, sensing, understanding or instinctively

Vocabulary

taboo (ta bo͞o′) *n.* a cultural or social rule forbidding something



South Side Street, Franklin McMahon.

View the Art McMahon depicts a streetscape with vacant buildings on Chicago's South Side. How does the economic situation in the painting relate to Cisneros's situation in this essay?

My mother was born like me—in Chicago but of Mexican descent. It would be her tough streetwise voice that would haunt all my stories and poems. An amazing woman who loves to draw and read books and can sing an opera. A smart cookie.

When I was a little girl we traveled to Mexico City so much I thought my grandparents' house on La Fortuna, number 12, was home. It was the only constant in our nomadic ramblings from one Chicago flat to another. The house on Destiny Street, number 12, in the colonia Tepeyac would be perhaps the only home I knew, and that nostalgia for a home would be a theme that would obsess me.

My brothers also figured greatly in my art. Especially the older two; I grew up in their shadows. Henry, the second oldest and my favorite, appears often in poems I have written and in stories which at times only borrow his nickname, Kiki. He played a major role in my childhood. We were bunk-bed mates. We were co-conspirators. We were pals. Until my oldest brother came back from studying in Mexico and left me odd woman out for always.

What would my teachers say if they knew I was a writer now? Who would've guessed it? I wasn't a very bright student. I didn't much like school because we moved so much and I was always new and funny looking. In my fifth-grade report card I have nothing but an avalanche of C's and D's, but I don't remember being that stupid. I was good at art and I read plenty of library books and Kiki laughed at all my jokes. At home I was fine, but at school I never opened my mouth except when the teacher called on me.

When I think of how I see myself it would have to be at age eleven. I know I'm thirty-two on the outside, but inside I'm eleven. I'm the girl in the picture with skinny arms and a crumpled skirt and crooked hair. I didn't like school because all they saw was the outside me. School was lots of rules and sitting with your hands folded and being very afraid all the time. I liked looking out the window and thinking. I liked staring at the girl across the way writing her name over and over again in red ink. I wondered why the boy with the dirty collar in front of me didn't have a mama who took better care of him.

Analyze Text Structure *How does the essay's middle section differ from the beginning?*

I think my mama and papa did the best they could to keep us warm and clean and never hungry. We had birthday and graduation parties and things like that, but there was another hunger that had to be fed. There was a hunger I didn't even have a name for. Was this when I began writing?

In 1966 we moved into a house, a real one, our first real home. This meant we didn't have to change schools and be the new kids on the block every couple of years. We could make friends and not be afraid we'd have to say goodbye to them and start all over. My brothers and the flock of boys they brought home would become important characters eventually for my stories—Louie and his cousins, Meme Ortiz and his dog with two names, one in English and one in Spanish.

My mother flourished in her own home. She took books out of the library and taught herself to garden—to grow flowers so envied we had to put a lock on the gate to keep out the midnight flower thieves. My mother has never quit gardening.

This was the period in my life, that slippery age when you are both child and woman and neither, I was to record in *The House on Mango Street.* I was still shy. I was a girl who couldn't come out of her shell.

How was I to know I would be recording and documenting the women who sat their sadness on an elbow and stared out a window? It would be the city streets of Chicago I would later record, as seen through a child's eyes.

I've done all kinds of things I didn't think I could do since then. I've gone to a prestigious university, studied with famous writers, and taken an MFA degree. I've taught poetry in schools in Illinois and Texas. I've gotten an NEA grant and run away with it as far as my courage would take me. I've seen the bleached and bitter mountains of the Peloponnesus.[3] I've lived on an island. I've been to Venice twice. I've lived in Yugoslavia. I've been to the famous Nice[4] flower market behind the opera house. I've lived in a village in the pre-Alps and witnessed the daily parade of promenaders.

I've moved since Europe to the strange and wonderful country of Texas, land of Polaroid-blue skies and big bugs. I met a mayor with my last name. I met famous Chicana and Chicano artists and writers and *políticos.*[5]

Texas is another chapter in my life. It brought with it the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship, a six-month residency on a 265-acre ranch. But most important, Texas brought Mexico back to me.

In the days when I would sit at my favorite people-watching spot, the snakey Woolworth's counter across the street from the Alamo[6] (the Woolworth's which has since been torn down to make way for progress), I couldn't think of anything else I'd rather be than a writer. I've traveled and lectured from Cape Cod to San Francisco, to Spain, Yugoslavia, Greece, Mexico, France, Italy, and now today to Texas. Along the way there has been straw for the taking. With a little imagination, it can be spun into gold.

3. *Peloponnesus* (pĕl′ə pə nē′səs) is the peninsula forming the southern part of mainland Greece.
4. *Nice* (nēs) is a port city in southern France.
5. *Políticos* (pô lē′ tē kôs) means "politicians."
6. The *Alamo* is a mission chapel in San Antonio, Texas. It was the site of a famous battle in Texas's war for independence from Mexico.

Quests and Encounters *In what ways does Texas bring Mexico back to Cisneros?*

Thesis *What do straw and gold represent for Cisneros?*