



**American Immigration Law Foundation
Immigration Curriculum Center Lesson Plan**

Immigration Themes in Film & Literature

Grade Level: High School (9th-12th grades)

Goal: To use literature and film to introduce high school students to various ways writers, poets, and filmmakers have depicted the immigrant experience in the United States.

Objectives: Students will develop their skills in discussion, literary analysis, written response, and artistic expression.

Specifically, students will:

- Identify the ways writers and filmmakers express ideas and themes related to immigration.
- Read the novel, [The House on Mango Street](#), by Sandra Cisneros.
- Read the poems, *I Learned to Sew*, by Mitsuye Yamada, and *How a Girl Got Her Chinese Name*, by Nellie Wong.
- View and analyze segments from the film [Avalon](#).
- Compare depictions of immigration in writing and film.

Materials: A classroom set of the novel [The House on Mango Street](#); copies of the poems *I Learned to Sew* and *How a Girl Got Her Chinese Name*; selected clips from the film [Avalon](#); disposable cameras; poster board; other art supplies.

Procedure:

1. Before Reading: Prepare for reading [The House on Mango Street](#) by having students consider the symbolism of “home.” Discuss what it means to feel “home” in a physical sense (why are people attached to a place called “home”)? What does it mean to feel “home” in a psychological or emotional sense? Next, read the first chapter in [The House on Mango Street](#) together and discuss why Cisneros begins the novel with a description of the houses the main character, Esperanza, has lived in.

2. As a follow-up to the discussion, have students take photos of the place they live. The photos may show physical features of the place or the photos may show people and/or activities they associate with the place. Use the photos as a prompt for writing a description of where they live. Tell students to include details and images that reflect both the spirit and the appearance of the place. Next, use the photos and the written text to create a visual display. Prompt students to suggest themes for each display. Next, introduce the concept of montage [montage = a literary, musical, or artistic composite of juxtaposed elements]. Explain that just as the students used text and photos to express ideas about where they live, the author of [The House on Mango Street](#) assembles short scenes and images to create an overall impression of a neighborhood and its residents.
3. **While Reading:** Begin the novel [The House on Mango Street](#). The book may be read aloud to reinforce the lyrical nature of the writing. As they read, students should keep a journal in which they note characters, details about the setting, themes and symbols. Teachers can also develop questions, or use questions from a published study guide, to encourage discussion about each chapter.
4. The chapters listed below deal expressly with immigration themes. Students may record responses to these chapters in their journal. These written responses will be used in a culminating activity.
5. "*My Name*"- In this chapter Esperanza explains the origins of her name.
6. Students can research the meaning of their own names. They might also research naming customs in their home culture and in other cultures.
7. "*Those Who Don't*"- In this chapter Esperanza explores themes of prejudice by describing how fear separates people. Here students might discuss geographic segregation. They might consider ways their own communities are segregated and discuss the topic of relations between different groups in the communities in which they live.
8. "*Papa Who Wakes Up Tired in the Dark*"- In this chapter Esperanza's father must return to Mexico to bury his own father. Here students might read about or relate their own stories about connections immigrants maintain to their countries of origin.
9. "*Geraldo No Last Name*"- In this chapter Esperanza relates the death of a man whose only means of identification is his first name. Here Cisneros considers the theme of anonymity and isolation as part of the immigrant experience.
10. "*No Speak English*" - The themes of family reunification, language barriers, and yearning for home are all addressed in this chapter. Students might note how Cisneros expresses each of these themes and use them later to compare how these themes are expressed in the film [Avalon](#).

11. "Alicia and I Talking on Edna's Steps"-In this chapter, towards the end of the novel, two characters discuss what home means. Alicia is certain that her home is Mexico, but Esperanza is more ambivalent about where her home is. After completing this chapter, and the two final chapters, return to the theme of home. Have students reconsider what home means. Is home where you live or is it where you feel most connected? Can it be both? Where does Cisneros believe home is?

Extension Activities:

1. As a follow-up to reading the novel, students might research the history of immigration from Mexico to the United States. Since this history is extensive, students might focus on immigration from one region of Mexico or to one region of the United States or they might research immigration during the first half of last century (the time period in which the novel takes place).
2. Students might also look for works by other Mexican American authors, poets and artists and consider how those writers and artists treat themes related to immigration.
3. For a further extension have students read the poems *I Learned to Sew* and *How a Girl Got Her Chinese Name*. These poems present the conflict of coping with the dual-identities many immigrants assume. Have students compare themes in these poems to those expressed in [The House on Mango Street](#).
4. As a final activity show the opening scene from the film [Avalon](#). Discuss how the main character reacts to his arrival in the United States. Watch other scenes from the film. Compare the character's adjustment to life in the United States to the way Esperanza describes her family's adjustment. Compare scenes from the neighborhoods shown in [Avalon](#) and those described in [The House on Mango Street](#). Compare how the character in [Avalon](#) maintains a connection to traditions from his country of origin to the way Nellie Wong maintains the connection in *How a Girl Got Her Chinese Name*. Ask students to consider if any of the depictions of immigration seem idealized. Why might a writer or filmmaker idealize certain aspects of the immigration experience? Why do others choose not to idealize this experience?

Culminating Activity: Have students return to the visual display they created at the beginning of the unit. Using texts they created throughout the unit, along with photos and drawings they have collected, have students create a second display, or montage, that expresses a theme related to immigration.

Bibliography:

- Cisneros, Sandra. [The House on Mango Street](#). New York: Random House, 1989.
- Levinson, Barry (Director). [Avalon](#). 1990.
- Wong, Nellie. *How a Girl Got Her Chinese Name* in [Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park](#). Berkeley, CA: Kelsey Street Press, 1977.
- Yamada, Mitsuye. *I Learned to Sew* in [Desert Run: Poems & Stories](#). Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Press, 1988.