

## Only Daughter

Born into a working-class family in 1954, Sandra Cisneros, the daughter of a Mexican-American mother and a Mexican father, spent much of her childhood shuttling between Chicago and Mexico City. A lonely, bookish child, Cisneros began writing privately at a young age but only began to find her voice when she was a creative writing student at Loyola University and later at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her best-known works are the novel *The House on Mango Street* (1983) and the short-story collection *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991); she has also published several collections of poetry. Cisneros's latest novel, *Caramelo*, appeared in 2002.

**Background:** In the following essay, which originally appeared in *Glamour* in 1990, Cisneros describes the difficulties of growing up as the only daughter in a Mexican-American family of six sons. Historically, sons have been valued over daughters in most cultures, as reflected in the following proverbs: "A house full of daughters is like a cellar full of sour beer" (Dutch); "Daughters pay nae [no] debts" (Scottish); "A stupid son is better than a crafty daughter" (Chinese); "A virtuous son is the sun of his family" (Sanskrit). This was largely the case because limited employment opportunities for women meant that sons were more likely to be able to provide financial support for aging parents. Contemporary research suggests that while a preference for sons has diminished considerably in industrialized nations, there continues to be a distinct preference for sons among many cultures in Asia and the Middle East, a fact that has raised concerns among medical ethicists worldwide. And even within the more traditional cultures of the industrialized world, old habits of mind regarding the role of women in society can die hard, as the attitudes of Cisneros's father suggest.

Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an anthology I was part of. I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That* explains everything."

Well, I've thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a Mexican family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I am today.

I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public. But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be

writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.

Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in the fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "*Que buena, ni'ja*, that's good." That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.

In retrospect, I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a "What's that you're writing?"

But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as "My only daughter, the writer." Not as "This is only my daughter. She teaches." *Es maestra*—teacher. Not even *profesora*.

In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink *Esto* sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody *Alarma!* magazines that feature yet another sighting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering husband by bashing his skull in with a *molecayete* (a kitchen mortar made of volcanic rock). Or the *folonovelas*, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the characters' mouths in bubbles.

My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is uninterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo.

When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered bouts of nostalgia. Then we'd have to let go of our flat, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and Bologna sandwiches, and head south. To Mexico City.

We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break, and complain or boast: "I have seven sons."

He meant  *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it as "sons." "I have seven sons." To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. "I have seven sons." As if he deserved a medal from the state.

12 My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure.  
But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve  
and whisper: "Not seven sons. Six! and one daughter."  
13 When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled  
my father's dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead  
of this—our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow,  
stubbled by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs.  
"Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us  
those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

14 Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in  
college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to  
college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always  
been poor.

15 Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards  
started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellow-  
ship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My  
book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.

16 At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same  
as always; hot *tamales* and sweet *tamales* hissing in my mother's pressure  
cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts,  
cousins—talking too loud and at the same time, like in a Fellini film,  
because that's just how we are.

17 I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been  
translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano writing,  
and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two  
years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally. And  
that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante\* movie on Galavisión\*\*  
and eating rice pudding.

18 There was a glass filmed with milk on the bedside table. There were  
several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock  
and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway.  
Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.

19 I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or  
because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt  
with Tepeyac, the *colonia* my father was raised in and the house he grew up  
in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote con-  
trol and read my story.

20 I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As  
if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places  
and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this  
so-and-so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading.

21 When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father  
looked up and asked: "Where can we get more copies of this for the rela-  
tives?"

\*Eds. NOTE—Mexican actor.

\*\*Eds. NOTE—A Spanish-language cable channel.

22 Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the  
most wonderful.

### COMPREHENSION

1. What does Cisneros mean when she writes that being an only daughter in a family of six sons "explains everything" (1)?
2. What distinction does Cisneros make in paragraphs 2 and 3 between being "the only daughter" and being "only a daughter"?
3. What advantages does Cisneros see in being "the only daughter"? In being "only a daughter"?
4. Why does her father think she has wasted her education? What is her re-  
action to his opinion?
5. Why is her father's reaction to her story the "most wonderful" (22) thing  
that happened to Cisneros that year?

### PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

1. Although Cisneros uses many Spanish words in her essay, in most cases  
she defines or explains these words. What does this decision tell you about  
her purpose and audience?
2. What is Cisneros's thesis? What incidents and details support her point?
3. Do you think Cisneros intends to convey a sympathetic or an unsympa-  
thetic impression of her father? Explain.

### STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. Where does Cisneros interrupt a narrative passage to comment on or ana-  
lyze events? What does this strategy accomplish?
2. Are the episodes presented in chronological order? Explain.
3. What transitional expressions does Cisneros use to introduce new episodes?
4. Cisneros quotes her father several times. What do we learn about him  
from his words?
5. Why does Cisneros devote so much space to describing her father in para-  
graphs 17–21? How does this portrait compare to the one she presents in  
paragraphs 9–11?

### VOCABULARY PROJECTS

1. Define each of the following words as it is used in this selection.  
embroidering (5)                      stubbed (13)
2. What is the difference in connotation between *sons* and *children*? Between  
*teacher* and *professor*? Do you think these distinctions are as significant as  
Cisneros seems to think they are? Explain.

## JOURNAL ENTRY

In what sense do the number and gender(s) of your siblings “explain everything” about who you are today?

## WRITING WORKSHOP

1. Write a narrative essay consisting of a series of related episodes that show how you gradually gained the approval and respect of one of your parents, another relative, or a friend.
2. In “Only Daughter,” Cisneros traces the development of her identity as an adult, a female, and a writer. Write a narrative essay in which you trace the development of your own personal or professional identity.
3. Are male and female children treated differently in your family? Have your parents had different expectations for their sons and daughters? Write a narrative essay recounting one or more incidents that illustrate these differences (or the lack of differences). If you and your siblings are all of the same gender, or if you are an only child, write about another family you know well.

## COMBINING THE PATTERNS

Cisneros structures her essay as a narrative in which she is the main character and her brothers barely appear. To give her readers a clearer understanding of how her father’s attitude toward her differs from his attitude toward her brothers, Cisneros could have added one or more paragraphs of **comparison and contrast**, focusing on the different ways she and her brothers are treated. What specific points of contrast would readers find most useful? Where might such paragraphs be added?

## THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

- “My Field of Dreams” (page 77)
- “Words Left Unspoken” (page 153)
- “Suicide Note” (page 357)
- “The Men We Carry in Our Minds” (page 456)

## MAYA ANGELOU

### Finishing School

Maya Angelou was born Marguerita Johnson in 1928 in St. Louis and spent much of her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, living with her grandmother. She began her varied career as an actress and singer, appearing in several television dramas and films; in 1998, she made her debut as a director with the film *Down in the Delta*. In the 1960s, she served as northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil rights group organized by Martin Luther King Jr. A well-known poet, Angelou composed and read “On the Pulse of Morning” for Bill Clinton’s 1993 presidential inauguration. The published version of the poem was a best-seller, and her recording of it won a Grammy award. She is currently on the faculty at Wake Forest University. It is likely, however, that Angelou will be best remembered for her series of autobiographical works, beginning with the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which appeared at a time when African-American literature was just beginning to flower.

**Background:** In the following excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou recalls a difficult incident that occurred when she was growing up in racially segregated Stamps in the late 1930s. At this time, wealthy young white women, rather than complete a rigorous education, often attended “finishing schools,” where they refined the social skills and artistic accomplishments deemed necessary for their future roles in polite society. While versions of such schools existed on a limited basis for the daughters of black professionals in urban areas, children of the poor and the working class—both black and white—were expected to learn practical skills that would provide them a means of employment. Such employment opportunities for rural black people were limited by and large to farm work; black women in particular were limited to domestic service in white households, the role for which Angelou describes her training in this essay.

Recently a white woman from Texas, who would quickly describe herself as a liberal, asked me about my hometown. When I told her that in Stamps my grandmother had owned the only Negro general merchandise store since the turn of the century, she exclaimed, “Why, you were a debutante.” Ridiculous and even ludicrous. But Negro girls in small Southern towns, whether poverty-stricken or just munching along on a few of life’s necessities, were given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood as rich white girls shown in magazines. Admittedly the training was not the same. While white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them. . . .

