You are required to read two books for English this summer:

1) Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
2) Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

We will give you a multiple-choice test on both books during the second English class this coming fall. Because these two books are episodic—they describe many characters and events briefly—we will focus the test questions on what you should know (in terms of plot and detail) if you carefully prepare the study questions we ask you to think about as you read. So please pay careful attention to the study questions and make good use of them: this study guide will help you enjoy the books and get more out of them. Please bring these books and this study guide with you when you come to Middlesex next fall; you should use the study guide to help you review the books before the test. (You should do most of this review before the night before the test, as you will have homework in a number of classes to do that night.) To help you get a sense of what the test will be like, we offer two sample multiple-choice questions on the last page of this document.

You will also write, during the first week of school, a formal paragraph on *The House on Mango Street*; you will write an essay on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* at the end of the first semester.

**Study Guide for Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

When this novel was first published in 1937, it was widely criticized (and misunderstood) by the prominent male writers of the time, both African American and white. However, the book was rediscovered and reprinted in the mid-1960s, and critics then celebrated its story, style, themes, and, in particular, the voice of the protagonist. The voice of the protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford, gives expression to experiences from the post-slavery era underrepresented in literature up to that time and allowed readers, especially African-American women, to take ownership of the novel. Mary Helen Washington, who wrote the foreword to the novel, explains that the voice of Janie allowed women the chance to discover “[their] own experiences, [their] own language, and [their] own history” in a way that other pieces of literature had not made possible before. Since then, the book has gained a wider and wider readership and become one of the most important and beloved American novels. Tragically, Hurston did not survive to see the excitement that grew up around her novel in the early 1970s. Indeed, Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave that it took Alice Walker, another important African-American woman writer, eleven years to find and mark herself. However, readers of the text today can honor Hurston by experiencing the story, by following the lead of its protagonist Janie—for her story can empower people of all backgrounds to discover their own voices.

From the novel’s opening pages, a reader is struck by the dialect in which Hurston captures the voices of her characters. The dialogue does not follow the rules of “Standard English” but instead, through its rich tradition, invites the reader into the very space where the story takes place, celebrating the casual conversational style of the characters, the time, and the
place. (Other important writers to use this style of dialogue, often referred to as “Black Vernacular,” are Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Faulkner.) Read the dialogue carefully at first, and you will soon get the hang of it and find it entertaining and revealing about the characters. Also carefully note the switch between this informal dialect and the formal language of the third-person, omniscient narrator. This balance between the written and spoken language of the text helps to develop many of the novel’s themes, including the ways in which language controls and organizes experience, the power of men vs. women, and interior vs. exterior awareness. As you read this book, follow these themes as well as any others other that strike you, for this novel has many themes and ideas.

The novel begins at the end of the story, when Janie returns to Eatonville, a “colored town” (p. 34), and a place that her second husband, Jody, established in the 1920s/1930s. While the town’s men and women gossip on their porches about Janie’s return, her best friend Pheoby defends Janie and goes to Janie’s house, asking to hear the story that kept Janie away from town for so long. Both Janie and the omniscient voice of the narrator tell her story, dividing it into three main parts correlated with her three husbands, Logan Killicks, Joe (“Jody”) Starks, and Tea Cake. Janie goes through a journey of self-discovery and awareness with each of her husbands; you should try to follow the “lessons” she learns and the ways she grows with each man. When you finish the novel, consider whether or not, by the end, Janie has a complete understanding of herself and whether it has been Janie herself or others who have determined the course of her life.

Here are further questions for you to consider as you read:

1. Why does Janie walk out of her first marriage? What has she learned about herself, about Logan, and/or about the world at large that would lead her to walk away? Does she leave for her own reasons or because of the influence of Jody Starks? Would Janie have left Logan if her grandmother were still alive?
2. Why does Janie have a hard time connecting with the people of Eatonville? How do people react to Jody when he begins to “settle” the town? How does Jody make it hard for Janie to create a life for herself in the town—that is, what restrictions does he place on her directly/physically and indirectly/emotionally? There is a moment in which Janie gains the courage to voice her opinions in the Eatonville General Store—what does she say in this moment and what is the reaction of the people of the town and of Jody?
3. After Jody’s death, many people in the town want to see Janie remarried. Do the people in Eatonville approve of Janie’s actions and choices after she becomes a widow and then a new wife? How is Tea Cake different from Janie’s other husbands and from the people of the Eatonville?
4. The pear tree and the horizon are two symbols that are introduced early on in the novel—what do they symbolize? In the final section of the novel, Janie and Tea Cake live through a hurricane—what does this experience symbolize? What flaws and weaknesses does the hurricane expose in Tea Cake, and have these characteristics been apparent at other points in the novel? Have other characters possessed these traits?
5. When Janie and Tea Cake arrive in the ’Glades to work in “de muck,” what kinds of people do they meet, and how do they interact with their new friends? Who is the hardest member of the ’Glades for Janie and Tea Cake to relate to and why? Even
though Tea Cake finds great success while “pickin’ beans and rollin’ dice,” how and why do both Tea Cake and Jody resist and fail to conquer the God or gods in their lives?

6. There are many times in the novel when Janie is silenced; one of the most important is during the courtroom scene at the end of the novel. Read this scene carefully and then recall other moments in the novel in which Janie is silent. What do these moments suggest about Janie’s self-discovery and growth as a character? What do you learn about the racial tensions of the time through the courtroom scene?

Study Guide for Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*

When Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* was first published, it seemed, like *Their Eyes Watching God*, to describe a protagonist and a community outside the mainstream of American experience. It is an interesting comment on the nature of literature and the nature of American life that these two texts have become such a central part of 20th-century American literature. Both books describe how a protagonist comes of age and finds a voice; both books describe a colorful community with which the protagonist has an edgy, complex relationship; both books explore the tensions between men and women, love, jealousy, and betrayal—in other words, they deal with the stuff of life. The similarities between these two texts are so strong that you should note them as you read, but it will be equally interesting for you to think about the differences between these two works. Do they have the same idea of community, of finding a voice, of coming of age? What are some ways in which they express different views or ideas?

*The House on Mango Street* presents its material in an original way: as a series of vignettes. A vignette is a short piece of fiction that creates an impression or a feeling, rather than telling a full story. Cisneros’s book, which is set in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago during the 1960s, consists of 44 vignettes, many only about a page long. Each vignette captures an important moment or feeling for Esperanza Cordero, the maturing protagonist, and/or the essential story of someone that she knows in this Latino community. As you read, try to understand what moment, feeling, or person each vignette is capturing—and thus how each vignette contributes to our understanding of Esperanza’s growing up and of her community. Here are some study questions for you to consider as you read:

1. From the first vignette, we can see that houses are important to Esperanza. What is Esperanza’s house on Mango Street like? What is Mango Street like in general? Why is the idea of a house so important to Esperanza throughout the novel? How does the novel create a portrait of Mango Street?

2. The third vignette begins, “The boys and the girls live in separate worlds.” Follow the separation of boys and girls in this community and the ways in which they live and mature separately and differently.

3. Esperanza describes and relates to a number of girls over the course of the novel. Consider the importance of each of these girls to her. What is the significance of her sister Nenny for Esperanza? Of Rachel and Lucy? Of Marin? Of Sally? Of Minerva? Think about how these girls suggest different possible identities or paths for
Esperanza—and how they suggest aspects of what it is like to be a girl in this community.

4. Though Esperanza and other youths are the focus of most of the vignettes, the brief, poignant portraits of the adults give the novel much of its power and reveal a great deal about this big-city Latino community. Note carefully the way the novel portrays the following adults: Esperanza’s father and mother, her Aunt Lupe, the old man in the junk store (Gil), Elenita, Ruthie, Mamacita, and Rachel and Lucy’s three aunts. Think about how each of these brief portraits helps the reader to understand what it is like to live in this community.

5. By implication, this novel both criticizes and celebrates the life on Mango Street. Which does the novel do more—criticize the life on Mango Street or celebrate it?

Sample Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Where does Motor Boat stay during the hurricane and why, and what happens to him during the storm?
   A. He remains in the 'Glades because he is too tired to leave, but he lives to tell his tale.
   B. Refusing to let Tea Cake control him, Motor Boat jumps in the car with the Bahaman 'Lias and leaves before the hurricane hits and so survives.
   C. Motor Boat remains in the tall house because he is too tired to continue on, and, surprisingly, he survives the storm in the house and later tells Tea Cake of his adventure.
   D. Motor Boat remains in the tall house because he is too tired to continue on, and sadly, Tea Cake never sees him again.
   E. Motor Boat finds refuge in Palm Beach with other friends from the 'Glades because he is able to make it through the high waters, but he eventually succumbs to malaria, having picked it up during his flight from “de lake.”

1. In the vignette “No Speak English,” Mamacita is sad because
   A. her husband beats her.
   B. she does not want to live in the United States.
   C. one of her children jumped off a roof and died.
   D. her husband has left her.
   E. her child is not adjusting well to a new country.

ANSWERS: 1. C; 2. B.