



Esperanza Rising

Discussion Guide #1



Encourage critical thinking and support your students' literacy development by asking questions during reading. Here are some questions you can ask your readers to engage them in a discussion.

CHAPTERS: Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1924 – Las Uvas (Grapes), six years later

Comprehension:

- Describe Esperanza's father. What is his position in society in Aguascalientes, Mexico?
He is a wealthy landowner. He owns El Rancho de las Rosas, a vast ranch sprawling thousands of acres with livestock and many crops, all of which are tended by many workers. He lives in a fine house with his family and is taken care of by servants.
- What does the short first chapter, set in 1924, tell you about the relationship between Esperanza and her father?
They are very close and they share a love of the land on which they live.
- After Esperanza pricks her finger on a thorn, how does she react? What do Mama and Abuelita say?
Esperanza immediately thinks that it means bad luck. She pushes the thought away, but she also feels a sense of worry and disquiet. Mama agrees it's bad luck, but she does not seem terribly worried, as bad luck could simply mean something little, like a broken egg. Abuelita says, "No hay rosa sin espinas," (There is no rose without thorns). Esperanza knows her grandmother means you can't avoid all the difficulties in life.
- What does Mama tell Esperanza about the bandits that have been seen in their area?
She explains that many people with less money resent the wealthy landowners. They see Papa has plenty of cattle while they have so little. Mama says some poor people don't have enough land to grow a small garden, and some are forced to eat cats. She says that the people know Papa is generous and has given some of his land to them, but it's not clear if the bandits know this.
- Abuelita tells Esperanza she will teach her to crochet the zigzag stitch while they are waiting for Papa to return. Why does Abuelita do this?
Esperanza says that Abuelita always makes her crochet to take her mind off worry. But we see that Abuelita also uses crocheting to teach other lessons, such as not being afraid to start over.
- Who are Hortensia and Alfonso?
Hortensia is the family's housekeeper. She is married to Alfonso, *el jefe*, or the boss, of the field workers. Hortensia, described as a Zapotec Indian, has been taking care of Esperanza and the family for as long as Esperanza can remember. Alfonso, probably also Zapotec, is Papa's close friend and helps him run the ranch.
- Who is Miguel, and how does Esperanza feel about him?
Miguel is the son of Hortensia and Alfonso. A few years older than Esperanza, he works on the ranch and is close to Esperanza's father. Esperanza and Miguel used to play together, and when Esperanza was younger she told her parents she would marry him. Now Esperanza realizes that because she is the owner's daughter and he is a worker, they cannot get married. She explains to Miguel that there is a divide between them like a deep river. After that, Miguel becomes cool and distant with her. Esperanza misses his teasing and laughter, although she pretends not to care.
- Who are Tío Luis and Tío Marco, and what are they like?
They are the older stepbrothers of Esperanza's father. Luis is the bank president and Marco is the mayor. Papa has told Esperanza that they care more about power and money than they do about people.



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Comprehension (continued):

- Whose body is in the back of the wagon?

Based on everyone's reactions, the body must be that of Esperanza's father.

Text Analysis:

- Based on Esperanza's lifestyle and her actions in the story so far, what kind of person would you say Esperanza is?

Esperanza is privileged because she was born into a life of wealth. She appreciates her comforts and her pretty things, and she is accustomed to being taken care of. She is proud of her parents and their position in society. She knows her parents expect her to behave properly and perform the responsibilities of her position, and she intends to do so when the time comes.

- In the scene marking the beginning of the grape harvest, how do the characters' clothes reflect their class status?


For the grape harvest, the field workers are dressed for work in the dusty fields. They are entirely covered in long-sleeved shirts and pants tied at the ankles, wearing bandanas and holding their straw hats. These are practical clothes meant to protect against the sun and insects. Esperanza, on the other hand, wears a light silk dress without a hat and a fancy satin hair bow. This emphasizes her position as the wealthy daughter of the owner: her expensive clothes are beautiful but not made for work. Similarly, Papa's fancy silver belt buckle shows his elevated status.

- Describing the scene as the household waits for news of Papa, the author uses words to create tension. What are some examples of this?

The author creates tension and a sense of foreboding with descriptions such as these:

- "Distracted, Mama paced at the window, each step making a hollow tapping sound on the tile floor."
- "The minutes passed into hours."
- "They tried to pass the time with small talk but their words dwindled into silence. Every sound of the house seemed magnified, the clock ticking, someone coughing, the clink of a teacup."

Personal Connection:

-  Esperanza and her family face a terrible, unexpected loss. What are some of the feelings that Esperanza is probably experiencing?

Student answers will vary.



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CHAPTERS: Las Papayas (Papayas) – Los Higos (Figs)

Comprehension:

- Who are Señor Rodríguez and Marisol?

The Rodríguez family owns and lives on the ranch next to El Rancho de las Rosas, Esperanza's home. Señor Rodríguez is a close friend of Esperanza's father. Marisol, his daughter, is Esperanza's best friend.

- How does Esperanza feel about the doll Papa gave her as a birthday gift? What makes her feel this way?

She treasures the doll above the other gifts. Because Papa gave her a doll every year for her birthday, the doll is a tangible connection to her Papa and her old life.

- Sitting in the meeting with the lawyer and her uncles, Esperanza feels that everything is "wrong." What specific details make her feel this way?

First, she notices the uncles have strewn papers across her father's desk, whereas Papa never made a mess on his desk. She sees Tío Luis sitting in Papa's chair as if he owns it. Worse, Luis is wearing Papa's special belt buckle, with its design of the brand of the ranch. Then she learns that Luis now owns their land. None of this feels right.

- In the meeting between the lawyer and the family, what does Tío Luis propose to Mama, and why?

He first offers to buy the house from her for a low price. Then, when she refuses, he proposes to marry her. After he leaves, the lawyer tells Mama that Luis wants to take advantage of her influence and the fact that people respect her. Luis wants to run for governor of the territory, and he thinks being married to Esperanza's mother would help him get elected.

- Why do Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel decide to move to the United States?

They believe that the uncles will treat them badly and take away their land and the cabin that Papa gave them. They believe that whereas in Mexico they will always be servants, in the United States they have a chance to be more. Alfonso's brother in California is able to arrange jobs and housing for them there.

- What do Esperanza and Abuelita each save from the fire?

Esperanza carries only the doll, her father's last gift to her. Abuelita retrieves the zigzag blanket she is crocheting.

- When Esperanza and Mama first discuss leaving, what advice does Abuelita share with Esperanza?

"Do not be afraid to start over." Abuelita first says these words when Esperanza is learning to crochet the zigzag stitch and she tells her to begin her rows again. Abuelita repeats the advice as she recounts how, at Esperanza's age, she and her family moved from Spain to Mexico. She says that it was an adventure, despite many hard times.

- What does Esperanza expect her life to be like in California?

She imagines Hortensia, Alfonso, and Miguel will continue to take care of her and Mama and that they will have a beautiful home.



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CHAPTERS: Las Papayas (Papayas) – Los Higos (Figs)


Comprehension (continued):

- Why does everyone laugh when Esperanza says she can work in the United States?
They know Esperanza is accustomed to being waited on and taken care of and that she has never done physical work.
- What are Abuelita's parting words for Esperanza?
She gives Esperanza the zigzag blanket and tells her to finish it. She says that like the zigzag pattern, life is full of ups and downs and that while they are now at the bottom of a valley, they will be on a mountaintop again. She says that they will be together after they have lived through many mountains and valleys.

Text Analysis:

- Abuelita refers to the legend of the phoenix. What is this legend, and how is it relevant to their lives at this moment?
The phoenix is a mythical bird that is reborn from its own ashes, making it a symbol of new beginnings after destruction. Abuelita is telling Esperanza that they will make a new life out of the ashes of their old lives.
- How do things change between Hortensia, Alfonso, and Mama in Papa's absence?
Hortensia and Alfonso have always worked as loyal servants, while Mama and Papa provided their housing and livelihood. Now Mama is desperately in need and relies on them for safety and even food. They also help plan her escape. Mama consults them as equals and listens carefully to their advice. She tells them she is strong enough to do field work with them. Hortensia says they will help one another—again, more as equals than they were before.
- Why does Mama tell Esperanza, "Papa's heart will find us wherever we go," as they prepare to leave?
Mama sees that Esperanza worries that leaving their home is like leaving Papa behind, too. She wants Esperanza to know that they hold Papa in their hearts and that his love will follow them.

Personal Connection:

-  In this story, Mama must decide whether or not to marry Luis. She can either maintain her wealth, position, and comfort or keep her self-respect and sense of dignity. She opts to leave her wealth and privilege behind and save her dignity. What are the pros and cons of each choice? Which would you choose?

Student answers will vary.