



Esperanza Rising

Discussion Guide #2



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: Las Guayabas (Guavas) – Los Melones (Cantaloupes)

Comprehension:

- As they ride away from home in the wagon, Hortensia and Esperanza recount how Miguel once saved them from robbers and Papa later rewarded him with a train ride. What does this story show about Miguel?

It shows Miguel is quick-thinking, resourceful, and brave. When he sees the bandits, he doesn't run away but hurries to warn his mother and Esperanza. Then, when Esperanza makes a noise and they are in danger of the robbers discovering them, Miguel releases the mouse he'd put in his pocket, making the robbers believe that the mouse made the noise. The fact that he'd pocketed the mouse to frighten Esperanza also shows he likes to tease her. Miguel's requested reward, a day-long train ride, shows his love of trains.

- Esperanza snatches her doll away from a poor girl on the train. What does Mama's reaction show about her character?

After Esperanza behaves like a privileged, spoiled child and grabs the doll away, Mama reprimands her, gently but firmly. She has Esperanza help her make a simple yarn doll for the girl. Mama shows generosity and kindness when she gives the new doll to the girl.

- Why is Esperanza uncomfortable with Mama's behavior on the train?

Esperanza feels that Mama is breaking the standards of proper behavior that ruled their lives as wealthy people in Mexico. She tells Mama that it isn't wise to confide her problems to "an egg woman" like Carmen, the passenger with the hens. Esperanza still has not come to terms with her own poverty. She wants to continue thinking of herself as proper and superior to the peasants.

- What happens to the woman who is begging at the train station, and what is the significance of the incident?

Esperanza and Miguel see wealthy people turn their backs on the crawling woman who is seeking their charity. Then Carmen, a poor woman with eight children, goes to her and gives her a coin and tortillas. Miguel points out to Esperanza that Carmen is generous although she has so little. He says that the rich ignore the poor, but the poor take care of those who have less. Miguel tells her that people with more Spanish blood have wealth and full bellies. Esperanza has not noticed this before, and she begins to feel guilty.

- Mama and Esperanza board the northbound train and then wait for the others to join them. How does Esperanza feel about the wait?

Esperanza feels increasingly anxious and worried that Miguel and Alfonso are so late to board the train. When they finally hop on, she is surprised to find herself not angry with them but only happy that they are safe and all headed into the United States. She feels comforted that they are all together.

- Miguel and Alfonso almost miss the train because, once again, they are getting water for their mysterious package. How does Esperanza feel about what they are doing? What does her reaction show about her character?

Esperanza is irritated that they keep getting out to get water for this package. She feels they are being silly. She is even more annoyed that they won't tell her what it is. This shows that she doesn't like being left out and that she can be judgmental of others.



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Comprehension (continued):

- In California, when everyone piles into Juan's old truck, what happens that signals that Esperanza is starting to accept her new social status?

She climbs into the back of the truck with the others and notices the truck bed looks better suited to hauling animals than people, yet she says nothing about it.

- Who is Isabel, and what is she like?

Isabel is Miguel's cousin, the daughter of Juan (Alfonso's brother) and Josefina. She is a smart, skinny eight-year-old with a soft voice, long dark braids, and large brown eyes. She seems in awe of Esperanza and anxious to make her feel welcome. She is full of enthusiasm and goodwill.

- Who is Marta? What are her beliefs?

Marta is a farm worker who sometimes stays with her aunt in the camp where Esperanza will be living. Marta's father was killed fighting in the Mexican Revolution against the landowners. She wants equality and is willing to fight for it. She wants the workers to strike for better conditions. Marta seems to resent Esperanza's former wealth and privilege, and she is rude to Esperanza for it.

Text Analysis:

- The first of these two chapters is "Las Guayabas" and the second is "Los Melones." What role does each of the named fruits (guavas and cantaloupes) play in Esperanza's story? Why might the author have chosen these titles?

In "Las Guayabas," Esperanza and her mother escape by hiding under a false bottom of a fruit wagon. To camouflage the hidden cargo, Alfonso and Miguel fill the back of the wagon with a mountain of almost-ripe guavas. Esperanza arrives at the train station still smelling of guava. In "Los Melones," they arrive in the United States. Driving from the train station to the camp, they stop at a field where leftover cantaloupes remain on the ground after harvest. Alfonso and Miguel toss some of these ripe melons into the back of the truck. The switch from guavas to melons emphasizes that Esperanza has arrived in a new land and a new phase of her life.

- As they journey from Mexico to the United States, how is Esperanza's understanding of Miguel changing?

In Mexico, Esperanza gave little thought to what Miguel's life was like. She felt they were separated by their different status in society. Now that Esperanza's status is the same as Miguel's, she pays more attention to his life. He teaches her about the living conditions of the poor and about his hopes for a new life in America. Esperanza also realizes that Miguel deeply misses her father and that his life has also been greatly affected by Papa's death.



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Text Analysis (continued):

- Soon after they arrive in California, Esperanza tries and fails to feel the heartbeat of the valley. What is the significance of this moment?

Esperanza wants to feel and hear the heartbeat of the earth here, as she had done with Papa in Mexico. But she cannot hear it. She becomes confused, anxious, and even panicked. This land doesn't feel like home. She feels disconnected and untethered from everything that she knows, which makes her feel sick. The moment highlights how important it is for Esperanza to feel a connection to the land, and it shows how she is suffering from being uprooted from her homeland. Also, Miguel arrives to comfort her and bring her back down to earth, showing how important their friendship is to Esperanza.

Personal Connection:

-  When Marta and Esperanza meet, they immediately dislike each other. Do you think it is fair to make an immediate judgment about someone? Why or why not?

Student answers will vary.



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CHAPTERS: Las Cebollas (Onions) – Las Almendras (Almonds)

Comprehension:

- Soon after arriving at the camp, Esperanza finds something to be grateful for. What is it?
Isabel shows her the group toilets, and Esperanza is unhappy about the lack of privacy. But when Isabel mentions that in some camps, they use ditches, Esperanza is suddenly thankful for the shabby bathrooms.
- When they arrive at their tiny cabin, Esperanza complains that they are living like horses. Mama answers that they have a choice. What are the two options that Mama presents? How does Esperanza respond?
Mama says they can either be together and miserable, or together and happy. Mama says she chooses to be happy and asks Esperanza what she chooses. Esperanza says, "happy," because that's what Mama wants to hear. But, in truth, Esperanza is miserable.
- Esperanza learns she will be responsible for taking care of the cabin and the twins. What new skills must she learn? What happens when she tries to sweep for the first time?
Esperanza has to learn how to keep the babies happy, change diapers, wash diapers, and do laundry (by hand). She starts to learn about food preparation. She also has to sweep the camp platform, but she doesn't know how to use a broom. Marta and the others see her inept efforts to sweep. She is so mortified that she thinks she'll never be able to show her face in the camp. But Miguel comes to her rescue with kindness, giving her a gentle, practical lesson in sweeping.
- Alfonso and Miguel carry and plant rose cuttings from Mexico. Why are these plants important to Esperanza?
They are from Papa's rose garden. They connect Esperanza to Papa and her old life in Mexico. When Miguel and Esperanza were young, Papa planted a rosebush for each of them. These are cuttings from those special bushes. As Mama says, the roses show Papa's heart is still with them.
- In the bathing scene, what details show us that Esperanza's character is starting to change?
At first, Esperanza assumes that Hortensia will help her, so she stands there waiting to be undressed as she used to do in Aguascalientes. The others stare, and Mama gently tells her she can bathe herself now, and Esperanza feels embarrassed again. Esperanza is grateful when Hortensia helps her cover the awkwardness, and they agree to help one another. Esperanza feels ready to do things for herself. She also realizes she actually likes being together with the women and girls bathing, talking, laughing, and helping one another. And when Hortensia needs more hot water for her bath, Esperanza immediately fetches it before anyone else can. Esperanza is waiting on Hortensia, which is the reverse of her old life.
- Marta and her friends urge the other workers to strike. What are their arguments in favor of striking? What is the reaction in Esperanza's camp?
Marta and her friends tell the workers that their employers will treat them badly if they don't speak up and strike. She says they must all stick together to demand better conditions for the good of all. She demonstrates this by waving a little kitten in the air and talking about how helpless it is. The people in Esperanza's camp tell Marta to leave. They are afraid that if they strike, they will lose their jobs. They just want to work, and they are grateful to their employer for giving them jobs and homes.



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Comprehension (continued):

- What does the bedtime conversation between Mama and Esperanza reveal about their relationship?
They are very close, and they also admire one another. They can be honest with one another about what is hard in their lives. Esperanza is surprised and pleased that Mama confesses that she misses her beautiful clothes. Mama tells Esperanza that she is proud of her for all she is learning. We also learn that they share the same hopes for their future.

Text Analysis:

- The camp holds regular *jamaicas*. What is the significance of these gatherings?
*These parties bring the community together to celebrate their common culture. They have traditional Mexican music, dancing, and refreshments. The *jamaicas* in Esperanza's camp also attract people from other camps and the nearby town who want to enjoy the Mexican fiesta. They get to share in foods and traditions that they enjoy. The *jamaicas* are also a good way to have fun with the community after a week of hard work.*
- Is Marta having an influence on Esperanza? How can you tell?
*Yes, slowly. After the *jamaica*, Esperanza is curious about what makes Marta so angry. She asks Josefina, who explains that Marta has lived in poor conditions in migrant camps and wants to fight for better conditions for all the workers. Then, when Isabel asks Esperanza to tell her about her fancy parties in Mexico, Esperanza feels guilty about the extravagance of her former life, especially compared to the poor conditions Marta and others have faced.*
- Reread the last lines of "Las Almendras." What do you think the author is signaling in Mama's words?
She prays for strength for Esperanza "no matter what happens." This foreshadows that there will be challenges ahead that will require Esperanza to be strong.

Personal Connection:

-  As Esperanza says, Isabel makes the household chores look so easy, but Esperanza finds them difficult. Have you ever encountered a task that was difficult for you, even though it seemed easy for others? What did you do when you faced that challenge?

Student answers will vary.