Focus Activity

Does being a family's only daughter or son—or the eldest, middle, youngest, or only child—affect who a person is?

Discuss In a small group, discuss the effect of family structure on you or on other people you know. If you think there is an ideal family size or position in a family, explain what it might be and why.

Setting a Purpose Read to learn about how gender and family position affected the author.

Background

The Time and Place
Sandra Cisneros recalls events that occurred during her childhood in Chicago, during her years in college, and during a visit to her parents at Christmastime the year before this essay was written.

Did You Know?
- In this essay, the author remembers her father referring to his children as "hijos" (e' hōs). In Spanish, hijos means "sons," but it also means "children."
- When the author's father speaks directly to his daughter, he uses the feminine equivalent of the word hijo, which is hija (e' hā). He says "mi/ma" (mē' há), which is a shortening of mi and hija, meaning "my daughter."

Vocabulary Preview

anthology (an th' ə lē) n. a collection of written works, such as poems, stories, or essays, in a single book or set; p. 314
retrospect (ret' rə spekt') n. the act of looking back or thinking about the past; p. 314
embroider (em broi' der) v. to make a story more interesting with imaginary details or exaggerations; p. 314
nostalgia (nos tal' jē) n. a sentimental longing for what is past or far away; p. 315
fulfill (fool' ful') v. to measure up to, or satisfy; to bring to pass or make real; p. 315

Meet Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros (sis nā' rōs) says that coming from a Mexican American family gives her "two ways of looking at the world." It also gives her "twice as many words to pick from." Although Cisneros weaves Spanish words and phrases into her writing, she writes primarily in English. The stories she tells are about "poor families, brown families. People I knew and loved but never saw in the pages of the books I borrowed from the . . . library." Cisneros, who writes both fiction and poetry, won the American Book Award for her work of fiction, The House on Mango Street.

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago in 1954. This essay was first published in Glamour magazine in 1990.
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, "Qué bueno, mi'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.2

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 Estó3 sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody ¡Alarma! magazines4 that feature yet another sighting of

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1. Que bueno, mi'ja (kā bwa'no mi'ha)

Vocabulary

anthology (an thōl' a ja) n. a collection of written works, such as poems, stories, or essays, in a single book or set

retrospect (ret' ra spekt') n. the act of looking back or thinking about the past

embroider (em brav' dar) v. to make a story more interesting with imaginary details or exaggerations

2. Es maestra (es mi'as tra); profesora (pro' sa ra), means "professor."
3. Estó (es'tō)
4. The ¡Alarma! magazines feature exciting stories about famous people, strange events, and shocking crimes.
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.

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.”

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, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils and springs. “Use this,” my father

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Vocabulary

*nostalgia* (nôs-tal’ja) n. a sentimental longing for what is past or far away

*fulfill* ( fool’fıl’ ) v. to measure up to, or satisfy; to bring to pass or make real

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9. *siete hijos* ( sye’ tê’ ē’hô’s)
"I am the only
daughter in a family
of six sons. That explains
everything."

said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

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.

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

At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing, same as always: hot tamales\(^\text{10}\) 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\(^\text{12}\) film, because that's just how we are.

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\(^\text{13}\) 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 Galavision\(^\text{14}\) and eating rice pudding.

There was a glass filled 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.

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\(^\text{15}\) 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 control and read my story.

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.

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 relatives?"

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

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\(^{10}\) The National Endowment for the Arts is a U.S. government agency that awards money in the form of grants and fellowships to writers and other artists.

\(^{11}\) A tamales (təˈmāˌlēz) is a Mexican dish made of highly seasoned ground meat that is rolled in cornmeal dough, wrapped in corn husks, and steamed.

\(^{12}\) The movies of Italian director Federico Fellini (1920–1993) are often filled with strange characters and noisy, chaotic events.

\(^{13}\) Chicano (chəˈkānō) means "Mexican American."

\(^{14}\) Pedro Infante (pəˈdoɾ oˈfanˈte) is a popular Mexican movie star who can occasionally be seen on Galavision, a Spanish-language cable-TV channel.

\(^{15}\) Tepeyac (te pēˈyāk) is a district (colonia) of Mexico City.
Responding to Literature

Personal Response
How did you react to the author's experience as a daughter?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

RECALL AND INTERPRET
1. Describe Sandra Cisneros's family. In your opinion, why does Cisneros write more about her father in this essay than about any other family member?
2. Explain how being the only daughter, and only a daughter, has proven to be both a positive and a negative experience for Cisneros.
3. What was the father's attitude toward a college education for his daughter? for his sons? Was Cisneros affected by her father's attitude? Explain why or why not, using details from the selection in your answer.
4. How does Cisneros react to her father's request for copies of her story? In your opinion, why does the father react differently to the story she gives him at Christmas than to all the other work she had done? What does his reaction predict for their future relationship?

EVALUATE AND CONNECT
5. By writing "My father represents ... the public majority," what might Cisneros be saying about her father—and about society? Explain.
6. "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. That explains everything." In what ways does the essay confirm Cisneros's statement? In what ways does the essay contradict it?
7. Cisneros says that she writes in order to win approval from her father. Whose approval do you try to win, and why is it important to you?
8. Theme Connections In your opinion, do all children face some adversity because of their family's expectations of them? Explain.

Author's Purpose
An author's purpose, or reason for writing, may be to entertain, to persuade, to express opinions, or to inform. Sometimes an author may have more than one purpose for writing. For example, you may find parts of "Only Daughter" entertaining, but Cisneros also had something important to say about daughters and about the role of women in society.
1. In your opinion, what is Cisneros's purpose for writing? Explain.
2. This work was published in Glamour magazine, which is read almost exclusively by women, many of whom are young and single. How might this information help you understand the author's purpose?

EXTENDING YOUR RESPONSE

Personal Writing
Family Matters Think about your response to the Focus Activity on page 313. How does your position in your family affect you? Compare your experience with that of Cisneros. Write your thoughts in your journal.

Literature Groups
Would Dad Be Sad or Glad? As a group, decide what Cisneros's father's reactions to "Only Daughter" might be. Find places in the essay that might, for example, provoke him to smile, feel regret, ask questions, and so on. Share your conclusions with other groups.

Save your work for your portfolio.