

# Only Daughter

Personal Essay by SANDRA CISNEROS

“I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. That explains everything.”

## Connect to Your Life

**Gender Roles** During the 1960s, the women’s movement reawakened in the United States. Since then, ideas about the proper roles of males and females have changed dramatically. For example, people have grown more accustomed to girls’ being athletic and participating in traditionally all-male sports such as basketball, soccer, and field hockey. In a class discussion, share your thoughts about the roles of males and females today. Discuss gender roles at school, at home, in the workplace, and in the community.

## Build Background

**Traditional Values** In her personal essay “Only Daughter,” Cisneros describes her father’s ideas about the proper role of females. Coming from the culture of old Mexico, Cisneros’s father holds the patriarchal beliefs of many traditional cultures—that is, he considers men the heads of families and the leaders of society. According to the values of the culture in which Cisneros’s father was raised, a woman needs only to “become someone’s wife” and devote herself to her home and family.

### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

anthology  
embroider  
fulfill  
nostalgia  
trauma

## Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS THEME** The **theme** of a work of literature is the central idea or message. Theme should not be confused with subject, or what the work is about. Rather, theme is a perception about life or human nature. As you read this personal essay, think about the perceptions Cisneros shares with you. Keep in mind that the central message she conveys in the essay is drawn from her own unique perspective as a woman, as a Mexican American, and as an only daughter in a family of six sons.

**ACTIVE READING UNDERSTANDING GENERALIZATIONS** A **generalization** is a broad statement about a number of people or things. Valid generalizations are based on a wide range of evidence. “Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories rarely contain humor,” for instance, is a valid generalization when made by someone who has read many of Poe’s stories. Notice, moreover, that the word *rarely* qualifies the statement, so that it is not claiming to be universally true. On the other hand, the statement “Dogs are better pets than cats” is an example of a faulty generalization. Generalizations can be faulty if they are

- overgeneralized, lack the support of backup evidence, or contain the words *all, one, every, or never*
- stereotyped, or based on fixed, unfair ideas about all members of ethnic, racial, or other groups

**READER’S NOTEBOOK** As you read this selection, use a chart like the one shown here to judge the accuracy of the generalizations you find about females and their roles. Write each generalization in the first column, then put a check in one of the other columns to classify it.

Generalization	Valid	Overgeneralized	Stereotyped

# Only Daughter

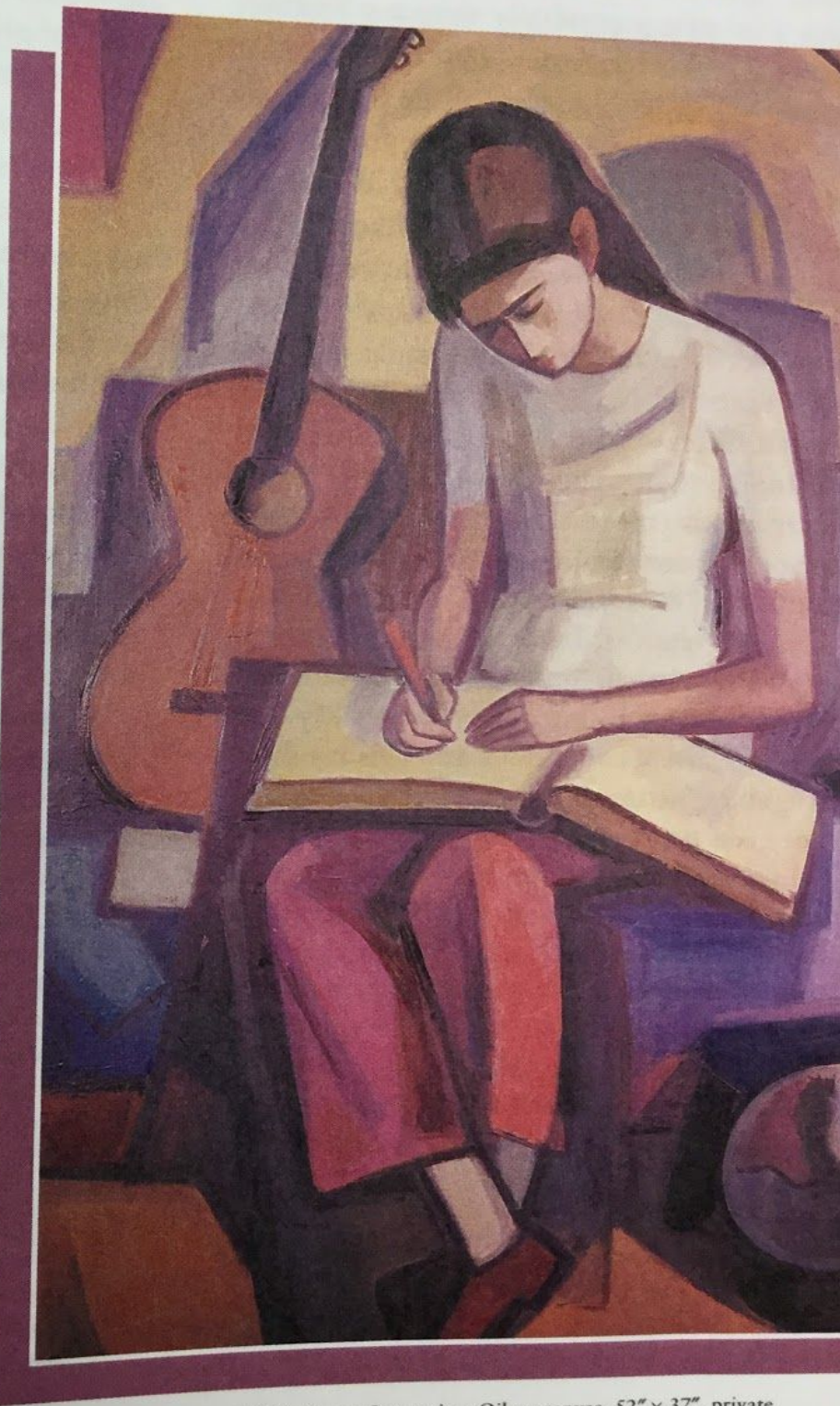
Sandra Cisneros

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 farmer 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



*Student with Guitar* (1975), Simon Samsonian. Oil on canvas, 52" × 37", private collection, New York.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**anthology** (ăn-thŏl'ə-jē) *n.* a collection of writings

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 bueno, mi'ja*,<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup>—teacher. Not even *profesora*.<sup>3</sup>

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*<sup>4</sup> on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering<sup>5</sup> husband by bashing his skull in with a *molcajete*<sup>6</sup> (a kitchen mortar<sup>7</sup> made of volcanic rock). Or the *fotonovelas*,<sup>8</sup> 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 disinterested 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 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*,<sup>9</sup> 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*."

1. *Que bueno, mi'ja* (kě bwě'nô mē'hā) *Spanish*: That's good, my daughter. (*Mi'ja* is a shortened form of *mi hija*.)
2. *Es maestra* (ēs mā-ēs'trā) *Spanish*: She is a teacher.
3. *profesora* (prô-fě-sô'rā) *Spanish*: professor.
4. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (lā vēr'hěn dě gwā-dā-lōō'pě) *Spanish*: the Virgin of Guadalupe. According to legend, a vision of Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, appeared on a hill outside Mexico City in 1531.
5. **philandering**: engaging in many casual love affairs.
6. *molcajete* (môl-kā-hě'tě) *Spanish*.
7. **mortar**: a bowl for grinding up grain.
8. *fotonovelas* (fô-tô-nô-vě'lās) *Spanish*.
9. *siete hijos* (syě'tě ē'hôs) *Spanish*. (*Hijos* can mean either "children" or "sons.")

WORDS TO KNOW  
**embroider** (ēm-broi'dər) *v.* to add imaginative details to; ornament  
**trauma** (trou'mə) *n.* a serious physical or emotional shock or injury  
**nostalgia** (nô-stāl'jə) *n.* a bittersweet longing for something or someone in the past

**W**hen 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 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.<sup>10</sup> 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*<sup>11</sup> 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<sup>12</sup> 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<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>14</sup> movie on Galavisión<sup>15</sup> 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,<sup>16</sup> 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 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. ♦

10. National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship: The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—a U.S. government agency—awards money in the form of fellowships to artists and writers.

11. *tamales* (tä-mă'lēs) *Spanish*: rolls of cornmeal dough filled with meat and peppers and steamed in cornhusk wrappings.

12. Fellini: the Italian movie director Federico Fellini (1920–1994), famous for his noisy, energetic films.

13. Chicano: Mexican-American.

14. Pedro Infante: a popular Mexican film star.

15. Galavisión: a cable TV network that features movies and programs in Spanish.

16. Tepeyac (tĕ-pĕ-yāk'): a district of Mexico City.