

The Ethnic *Bildungsroman*

by

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This thesis will compare coming-of-age narratives by writers from three different ethnic groups, Mexican American, Native American, and Asian American: *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros; *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie; and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. The purpose of this study is to analyze three coming-of-age novels using the definition of *bildungsroman* as an analytic tool. This analysis will enable me to determine the existence and characteristics of the ethnic *bildungsroman* and how it differs from the original genre. For modern teenagers growing into adulthood and dealing with completely different issues from those faced by traditional *bildungsroman* protagonists, a new genre such as ethnic *bildungsroman* is necessary. The ethnic teens face additional challenges, such as dual identity, non-chronological timelines, stereotypes, racism, and staying loyal to the community. Sometimes the protagonists help the community with their art. Not only do the ethnic protagonists succeed and build connections through art, but they also come back to the community and try to inspire others as well.

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DEDICATION

To Ron, Heather, and Jack Elliott,
for studying and writing by my side,
for encouraging me,
and for bringing so much joy into my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Beneath the armor of skin/and/bone/and/mind
most of our colors are amazingly the same.
— Aberjhani, *Elemental: The Power of Illuminated Love*

Aberjhani's poem portrays challenges and insight that surround the development of ethnic teens in fiction. Ethnic teens face many challenges in the three books I have studied as ethnic *bildungsromane*: *The House on Mango Street* (1954), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007), and *American Born Chinese* (2006). In each of these novels, the protagonist overcomes stereotypes, racism, and dual identity issues. Some of the protagonists emerge as artists as well. Protagonists realize sacrifices made by community and family members before them and become bridge-builders between communities. The authors Sandra Cisneros, Sherman Alexie, and Gene Luen Yang provide insight with components seen in Victorian *bildungsromane*: autobiographical elements, ambiguous but hopeful endings, epiphanies, and financial difficulties. The commonality between these hopeful ethnic characters is that they experienced a "soul wound" as a result of mistreatment in stories that echo the *bildungsroman* format. The characters overcome the internal and external challenges, and the three authors have created a more modern *bildungsroman*, the ethnic *bildungsroman*.

After reading *The House on Mango Street*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, and *American Born Chinese*, three novels about ethnic teens, I noticed many similarities between these three books and the Victorian *bildungsroman*. The fundamental plot of a *bildungsroman* is seen in the Victorian novels of growing up and spiritual maturation. Some of the best-known *bildungsromane* came from the Victorian period: *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (1861). In *Jane Eyre* for example, the protagonist experienced a spiritual crisis and epiphany, which led her to go against the rules of

the church concerning her marriage (Fraser 111). In *Great Expectations*, the convict gave Pip money and a social role, which led to conflicts and crises about class and loyalty (Maynard 284).

These two novels embody the typical conventions of the Victorian *bildungsroman*:

autobiographical elements, hopeful yet ambiguous endings, epiphanies, and lack of money.

First, Jane from *Jane Eyre*, must overcome obstacles in society before she can fully develop as an individual and as a woman, primarily a lack of beauty and money. Due to her deficiencies, society made Jane feel unfit for marriage (Maier 321-322). Her intelligence and courage did not help her in Victorian society where these attributes were for boys, not girls (322). As Jane learns to have self-confidence and make her own decisions, she has that epiphany for which a *bildungsroman* is known. In the end of the novel, she is hopeful because she overcame society's restraints and did marry. Seeming to be autobiographical, Jane also speaks directly to the reader in first person at the end of the novel saying, "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 522). Brontë married late in life and focused on her religious beliefs like Jane; Brontë married in 1854 at the age of thirty-eight (Weisser ix-xi). Additionally, the end of *Jane Eyre* is hopeful as Jane endured and made decisions according to what she believed, even if it went against her religion. Her epiphany came when she decided that her religion was too restrictive. In the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, the novel ended in an ambiguous fashion with the reader unsure if Jane has achieved complete independence/happiness (Maier 332). These autobiographical details, the ambiguous but hopeful ending, epiphany, and the lack of money make this novel a typical Victorian *bildungsroman*.

The second Victorian novel that is an example *bildungsroman* is *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Pip also experiences a lack of money as he lives in poverty with his cruel sister and her kind husband Joe until he mysteriously receives money from an unknown source

(Dickens 3). He has an epiphany when he realizes the money he receives throughout the book is from the convict Magwitch whom he helped at the beginning of the book, not Miss Havisham as he had assumed (158, 335). Finally, the childhood of Dickens is similar to that of Pip. Mr. John Dickens, the father of Charles who always spent more money than he had, got arrested and had to move the family into debtor's prison, which was similar to very low income apartments when Charles was twelve. The only way to get out of the debtor's prison was either to die or to have a child earning enough money to pay the debts. The parents could not leave the prison, so Charles had to work and quit school, a place he loved and knew would help him become a proper gentleman. Charles Dickens had to work labeling and screwing the cap on jars of boot polish called Warren's Blacking, a factory with standing water and rats all around, which was run by his cousin. This experience humiliated Charles for six months, but it seemed like forever. After his grandmother passed away, she left just enough money for her son John to pay his debts and get them out of prison. His mom wanted Charles to keep working, so Charles never truly loved his mom again. He felt like a mistreated child, and in almost every novel he wrote, he includes a central character that has been mistreated (Engel). Each quality of the Victorian *bildungsroman* is present in *Great Expectations*, which details Pip's coming-of-age including an epiphany, autobiographical details, lack of money, and a hopeful ending.

The three award-winning authors of the ethnic *bildungsromane* have utilized some of the typical conventions in the three novels studied here. They have taken the novels to a deeper level when they tried to influence society to strive for positive change. These ethnic stories reflect the marginalized communities' struggle to assimilate into society's mainstream without forfeiting their individuality and focus more on stereotypes and racism rather than on class. Eventually assimilating back into society after succeeding is more difficult for a protagonist in an ethnic

bildungsroman. Alienation is more of a focus in an ethnic *bildungsroman*, and the dual nature or split in the psyche of the protagonist sets these stories apart as a new genre. These protagonists are building bridges between communities and appreciating work that has been done before their time.

The elements that stem from traditional *bildungsromane* are autobiographical details, ambiguous but hopeful endings, epiphanies, and financial difficulties. As a result of the status quo in novels, characters suffer socially, politically, and financially, but ethnic protagonists suffer even more. Many writers who feel outside the circle as minorities fight against these norms and constructs, so they give a voice to the protagonists in the ethnic *bildungsromane*. Not only do the individuals in many subcultures feel the need to break out and succeed, but also they do not feel this is enough. They feel they must make life better for their communities as in the more specific *bildungsroman*, the *kunstlerroman*. Struggling with the marginalization of their communities, the protagonists find only one way to succeed: escape, become a success, and return to help the community. This returning to the community and feeling of obligation to others is not the norm in a Victorian *bildungsroman*; therefore, the new ethnic *bildungsroman* is necessary.

In an ethnic *bildungsroman*, authors combine elements from traditional *bildungsroman* and *kunstlerroman*, and add a few of their own. The elements they add on their own are not exactly the same, but a few consistencies stand out. Cisneros, Alexie, and Yang use first person point of view, and the point of view is from a person forced into the margins by society or seen as an outsider. They do not always follow a chronological timeline in their stories. This freedom of time allows for a more stream-of-consciousness tone that better imparts the feelings the

protagonist have as they struggle to grow up. Finally, a major challenge for the teens is dual identity (having a stake in more than one community or culture).

The main differences that set an ethnic *bildungsroman* apart from a traditional *bildungsroman* are that the central obstacle is not within the protagonist but within society. The obstacle manifests in several ways such as racism and stereotypes. In a traditional *bildungsroman*, the protagonist has a certain amount of faith in society even though s/he has challenges. For example, Jane Eyre “must find a way to succeed in a society which values the very things she lacks: place, money, prestige and beauty” (Maier 322). In the ethnic *bildungsroman* the protagonist faces these obstacles in society plus stereotypes, and the deeply-run problem is more than a class issue; it is more about what is deep in the psyche of the protagonists. American society still has an idea about who a “typical” American can be, so the ethnic teen is trying to navigate the dual identity challenges while trying to gain acceptance, facing multiple problems simultaneously. In an ethnic *bildungsroman*, the protagonist wants to retain his identity and be proud of it. He or she does not want to lose unique qualities, but at the same time, the protagonist wants to fit in. For the protagonist in the ethnic *bildungsroman*, the community is always a concern, sometimes even a burden. The goal is not to leave his community but to fit into the larger society and achieve acceptance for him/herself and for the community as a whole. The acceptance in an ethnic *bildungsroman* is more difficult because the protagonist wants to retain what makes him/her unique and part of his community, and s/he has to overcome stereotypes and racism in order to succeed.

These three writers have created novels that are thought-provoking and visually stimulating and that give insight to how a person who feels ostracized fights back for his rightful place in the community. Not only do the protagonists stand up for themselves, but also have lofty

goals of improving society for fellow community members. These books employ many modern techniques that make the stories seem more interesting, such as artwork, non-linear timelines, and themes that address big questions about how to best help others while still respecting their identities and cultures. These novels are current, interesting, and inspiring. They show that as the ethnic teens get older, they appreciate the adults that helped them succeed. This appreciation turns into gratitude. The teens then turn back and help the community and become bridge-builders. Most importantly, these writers have carved out a place in history that cannot be forgotten.

Chapter 2: *The House on Mango Street* as an Ethnic *Bildungsroman*

Distinct similarities surface from three novels that can be considered part of a new genre, the ethnic *bildungsroman*. The first novel, *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros, is the oldest of the three novels. In this chapter, I will examine *The House on Mango Street* to look for the qualities Cisneros uses from the Victorian *bildungsroman* and the more specific *bildungsroman*, the *kunstlerroman*. By examining what *bildungsroman* conventions Cisneros adopts and rejects and what new elements she adds to the genre, I propose a new genre of the ethnic *bildungsroman*. All of these techniques help her create an award-winning novel that takes elements from the last one hundred years or more of writing and give a voice to a group who has felt marginalized and silenced.

While she borrows some qualities, she purposefully adds others to make a point, a point that people should not be pushed to the margins of society. For example, since Cisneros did not have faith in her country as protagonists of the Victorian time did, this aspect is missing. For example, Pip in *Great Expectations* fit into society, ate out, and went to plays (Dickens 383). Even though he had problems and doubts, his community was not foremost on his mind. Esperanza includes her concerns and worries about Mango Street (Cisneros 107). In the *kunstlerroman* the protagonist is an artist who cares about society and works to improve it on his or her way to maturity. By the end of the novel, Cisneros includes these concerns about society and facets such as fighting against stereotypes, staying loyal to one's ethnic community, navigating a dual identity, creating a protagonist artist/writer, and creating a non-chronological timeline. In portraying a successful artist and using the present tense to describe the past, Cisneros instills new perspectives into an old genre.

Fighting stereotypes is not easy. Other writers wanted to speak up about the marginalized Mexican Americans, too. Right after Cisneros wrote *The House on Mango Street*, Eliana Rivero wrote an article titled “From Immigrants to Ethnics.” She wrote about minorities, especially females of Latino descent, being ignored. Rivero recognized the “ever-growing production of African-American, Native American, and Asian American women” appearing in anthologies while women of Latino descent were mentioned only briefly if at all (189). Rivero spoke out when *The House on Mango Street* remained on “the fringes of the canon – even the revised Anglo canon – despite the attention given to it by feminist critics” (190). Basically, Cisneros won awards for her book, but colleges, even as they started to include different cultures, still left women of Latino descent out of the mainstream.

Even though some writers felt strongly that Mexican Americans were overlooked in society, it took time for colleges to include Mexican American writing in the literary canon. Despite the lack of support from anthology publishers at first, *The House on Mango Street* sold over two million copies and won the American Book Award. The public was ready to hear from these “silenced” writers, and the popularity of *The House on Mango Street* proved this. Because *The House on Mango Street* sold so many copies, publishers released a twenty-fifth anniversary copy in 2009. It has been published in many languages, and many schools require students to read this book.

Cisneros borrows four elements from the Victorian *bildungsroman*. Like other ethnic *bildungsroman* novels, *The House on Mango Street* follows some conventions of the traditional *bildungsroman*, popular in the late nineteenth century. First, the novel has many autobiographical aspects. Second, the novel focuses on the lack of money in her community; the protagonist sees money as a way out of poverty just as protagonists in the Victorian times did.

Third, the novel includes the protagonist's epiphany, which changes the course of the protagonist's life in some way. Fourth, *The House on Mango Street* has a hopeful ending, but it is not a decisive closure.

Autobiographical aspects are another similarity between Victorian *bildungsroman* and ethnic *bildungsroman*. Many of her autobiographical references are confirmed in her introduction and her dedication. Not only in the introduction of her book, but also in interviews, Cisneros explains how the book helped her personally. She also touches on the intended audience and the goal of acceptance. As with other ethnic American writers, Cisneros remembers trying to fit in as a teen in the United States. As a result, these issues show up in her novel.

Cisneros spoke about why she wrote *The House on Mango Street* in an interview. When speaking to Renee Montagne with the National Public Radio, Sandra Cisneros said she wrote the novel for herself, but she wanted to create something accessible to her community, too:

Well, you know, when I wrote *House*, when I started it, I didn't think I was giving voice to Latino women. I thought I was just finally speaking up. I had been silenced, made to feel that what I had to say wasn't important.

I wanted to write something in a voice that was unique to who I was. And I wanted something that was accessible to the person who works at Dunkin Donuts or who drives a bus, someone who comes home with their feet hurting like my father, someone who's busy and has too many children, like my mother. I wanted this to be lyrical enough so that it would pass muster with my finicky classmates, but also open to accept all of the people I loved in the neighborhood I came from. (NPR interview)

Even though Cisneros said she wrote the book mainly for herself, all of her community members are in her mind during this interview. Her neighborhood is a part of her, and she wants to be accepted for the person she is and was. In fact, she wants this for all women and for all of her neighbors because she remembers the feeling of "not fitting in" at the University of Iowa as a

person of color (NPR interview). All of these feelings of wanting to be accepted and wanting to be proud come out in this patchwork quilt of a book with a dedication to the women.

The first page contains the dedication and emphasizes her goal of independence for women. The dedication is “to the women.” She wrote it in both Spanish and English. Right away she sets the tone that she is trying to better society and stand up for women, not just write a story about an individual. Trying to speak out for the community and for women are a key component of the ethnic *bildungsroman*. The dedication of *The House on Mango Street* in both languages also shows how she wanted to reach as many people as possible, and how the challenges women face, in particular, touch her heart. Cisneros released her pent-up feelings by writing, and she hopes others will follow her lead. She finally felt able to speak up after years of feeling silenced.

In the introduction to *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros remembers writing with a multicultural group of people who felt silenced. It included Blacks, whites, and Latinos, men and women. She said what they had in common was a concern for the community. She wrote, “What we have in common is our sense that art should serve our communities” (xvii). Even though the writers/artists did not have money, they did have time. Cisneros felt it was an emergency to help the people who were suffering and had no way out. In her introduction, she wrote, “We do this with no capital except our valuable time. We do this because the world we live in is on fire and the people we love are burning” (xviii). She felt she had to speak for those who could not speak for themselves, and she knew other writers who felt this same way. This urgency is a common thread between the three novels, as well as the first person point of view that gives the reader a feeling of first-hand information.

The second motif that Cisneros borrows from Victorian *bildungsroman* is the focus on money. The lack of money is a theme in the Victorian *bildungsroman* and in ethnic

bildungsroman. This lack of money eats away at Esperanza. The first example of how money could help her family is they could buy a new house. She often reflects on the family's dream to own a home that is nice, not like the one they live in on Mango Street. The house the family envisioned had real stairs, running water, pipes that work, a basement, three bathrooms, and a big yard (4). "This was the house Papa talked about when he held up a lottery ticket and this was the house that Mama dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed" (4). Conversely, the house on Mango Street is a constant reminder of dashed dreams and poverty, all of the dreams unrealized.

A second way money could help is taking away the embarrassment they feel each time someone sees their house. This is similar to how Pip from *Great Expectations* felt about his home saying, "It is a most miserable thing to be ashamed of home" (Dickens 106). One time a nun from school saw Esperanza playing out front of her house and was surprised by the poor living conditions. Esperanza felt ashamed as she looked at the "paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows" (5). She right then made a promise to herself that she would have a real house that she could be proud of.

The dream of a nice house of which she can be proud becomes Esperanza's dream because it is a symbol of happiness and success. In "A House of My Own," Esperanza dreams: "A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after"(108). Esperanza has this dream throughout the book, but by the end of the book, she realizes her goal is actually much larger. The quote starts with the possessive adjective "my." After she realizes she is only thinking of herself, she starts to turn outward, and then she uses the pronoun "nobody." This shows the change when she turns her attention from herself to the

community. As she writes and thinks about it, she realizes that a home for herself would not really make her content; it would only solve her physical needs. She would have a bigger dream to accomplish after her epiphany. She thinks back to her own mother and how she could have had a much better life if the community had had more opportunities.

Esperanza's mother inspired the dream to make a difference in the community, a community ashamed of its poverty. Poverty keeps the community from achieving its goals. For example, her mom was smart and successful in school, but she was ashamed of her clothes. This shame made her drop out of school. "You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had a brain" (91). Esperanza knows that her community could have been much richer and that life could have been more meaningful for many of her neighbors. In the chapter "A Smart Cookie," Esperanza remembers her mother's words. "Look at my *comadres*. She means Izaura whose husband left and Yolanda whose husband is dead. Go to take care all your own, she says shaking her head" (91). The neighbors and her mother have regrets, and Esperanza is determined to help others be proud of themselves and the community. She knows her mother who "sings with velvety lungs powerful as morning glories" deserved to go to the ballet and to see a play (90). And, as a result, she feels encouraged to take care of her own community.

An epiphany solves needs in a person's mind and slowly percolates until the person is ready to accept the challenge. Only after Aunt Lupe dies does Esperanza start to put it all together and realize what she needs to do. When she realizes her goal, this is her epiphany. In an ethnic *bildungsroman*, just as in a Victorian *bildungsroman*, the protagonist experiences some sort of turning point. This moment changes the protagonist. For Esperanza, that moment of clarity is when Esperanza understands that her aunt believed in her and in her writing. Her aunt

encouraged her to keep writing and to use the power of the pen. Her thoughts became clear after Aunt Lupe's death.

Esperanza remembers her Aunt Lupe's encouragement about her writing. For instance, Aunt Lupe listened to Esperanza read to her. After she felt more comfortable, Esperanza shared her own poem. It was difficult to reveal her inner thoughts through a poem, even to her aunt who "listened to every book and every poem" Esperanza read her (60). When Esperanza reflected back to that time, she remembered her conversation with her aunt: "That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant" (61). Esperanza looked back at this moment when her aunt listened to her read her poem. Esperanza "came very close" to her aunt and "whispered it into the pillow" (60). The fact that she whispered it shows how she felt tentative and unsure of herself at this point.

Shortly after that, Esperanza and her friends made fun of Aunt Lupe. On that same day that the girls made fun of Aunt Lupe for her limp limbs, she passed away. Esperanza said, "And then she died, my aunt who listened to my poems. And then we began to dream the dreams" (61). The dreams are ambiguous; they could be dreams that Aunt Lupe encouraged her to dream, or they could be nightmares of guilt from making fun of her aunt, the only person supportive of Esperanza's writing. It is probable that she dreamed positive dreams since she remembers her aunt as "my aunt who listened to my poems," not as the aunt lying in the bed, limp with illness. She felt she understood her aunt later in life as well since she said, "at that time I didn't know what she meant." This implies that later she did know what her aunt meant about writing to keep herself free. Aunt Lupe gave Esperanza the gift of freedom. Lying in a bed day after day, unable to see, clean, or even move, Aunt Lupe knew that keeping one's mind free is even more

important than keeping one's physical-self free. Aunt Lupe gave Esperanza much more than she realized at the time.

Her aunt's death is turning point for Esperanza. All of her positive actions and life goals flow from this moment. Even the dedication in the front of the book alludes to this focus. Cisneros wants all women to have this type of epiphany and realization. Women need the confidence to affect change and stand their ground. No longer would women be considered "dangerous" for the shoes they wear; they would be considered dangerous for the power they would wield with their thoughts, actions, and words. This would match the epiphany Esperanza experiences in *The House on Mango Street*.

The epiphany Esperanza experiences after she realizes her Aunt Lupe's point about writing to be free is repeated on the last page of the book. Esperanza explains that she writes so that "the ghost does not ache so much" (110). The ghost is her life on Mango Street. She belongs to Mango Street but not completely. Her writing allows her to be free. She says that Mango Street has a hold on her, but it is not with both arms. About Mango Street, the ghost, she says, "She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free" (110). Esperanza leaving the ghost of Mango Street behind indicates a monumental change or the epiphany found in Victorian and ethnic *bildungsroman*. This leaving Mango Street is leaving the familiar and taking a risk, exactly what her aunt encouraged her to do in order to be free. Writing takes courage, and actually following through on ideas takes even more courage, but the only way to be free is to take these risks and act on ideas and dreams.

This ending is similar to a Victorian *bildungsroman* ending since it is not decisive but is hopeful. Esperanza hopes to be free and to be strong. She wants to leave in order to become stronger. She wants to become stronger so that she can come back and help others who are not

strong enough to get out of Mango Street or to be free. Her Aunt Lupe was not strong enough to be free since she was bed-ridden and poor, and Aunt Lupe is just one example of someone not strong enough to be free. Esperanza knew other women on Mango Street who needed help to be free because of many sad situations, and she planned to surprise them all by coming back and trying to rescue them, another key component in an ethnic *bildungsroman*.

In addition to borrowing aspects from the Victorian *bildungsroman*, Cisneros contributes to it by introducing new elements. Her protagonist is a writer, reflecting on thoughts and how to change society. In order to change society, artists identify a goal and figure out a way to reach that goal whether it be through drawing or writing; this is similar to a *kunstlerroman*. Esperanza fits this category of artist-protagonist since she writes and observes and remembers the people on her childhood street and then reflects on how that person or group affected her. She remembers Marin, Alicia, and the bums, so she writes to improve the street and community for all. Writing is an arduous task. It gets the word out. It makes the author feel better after the emotions are released. Finally, writing helps the author focus on what matters most. Once the writer has released his/her anger and focused on a goal, s/he can spread the word and inspire others to help his/her community.

After all of Esperanza's writing about her neighbors, she identified the problem: women who are trapped by the cultural stereotype of helplessness. One of the women who seem to be trapped in her home on Mango Street or at the very least trapped in her situation is Marin. In "Marin," Marin dreams of getting married, wearing nice clothes, and living in a big house. For now she is living with her aunt, selling Avon, and supporting her young cousins. Eventually, she is too much trouble for her aunt and has to leave, which makes her life unstable (27). Esperanza notices that Marin "is not afraid" (27). She is waiting "for someone to change her life" (27). She

is not in control of her destiny as Esperanza wants to be. Esperanza feels sorry for Marin, and Marin serves as a warning about what not to do. Esperanza does not blame Marin and others trapped in poverty and tough situations. By capturing her astute observations in vignettes, she keeps them close in her thoughts and tries to figure out a way to help these women and others on Mango Street while avoiding making the same mistakes.

Esperanza notices a neighbor who is different because she has confidence and will go to school to improve her situation, and this helps her find her goal. This one girl has more of an impact on Esperanza than most, and that girl is Alicia from the chapter “Alicia Who Sees Mice.” Esperanza notices Alicia who is, first of all, afraid of her father (31). After Alicia’s mother died, she works in a factory. Even though Alicia works all day, she studies all night; she sees mice her dad says do not exist (32). She has confidence in herself that she will not be cooking and cleaning all of her life and that her dad is wrong about his expectations or lack of expectations for females. By observing Alicia, Esperanza learns what she wants for her own life, to be independent, but by listening to Alicia she develops goals of her own.

Ellen McCracken in her article “Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*: Community-Oriented Introspection and the Demystification of Patriarchal Violence,” wrote about Alicia. She thought that Alicia “represented a clear-sighted, non-mystified vision of the barrio” (70). Her ability to see life as it was helped clarify Esperanza’s purpose. McCracken continued by writing, “As a role-model and advice-giver to Esperanza, she embodies both the anti-patriarchal themes and the social obligation to return to one’s ethnic community that are so central to Cisneros’ text” (McCracken 70). Alicia may have suggested Esperanza’s purpose, but Esperanza takes the suggestion and makes it her goal, even later expands her goal. Esperanza admires and respects Alicia for her self-confidence and strength.

In a conversation in this chapter “Alicia Sees Mice,” Alicia tells Esperanza what she is in her usual straight-forward manner, and the comment made her think. First of all, it is important that Alicia had a home, Guadalajara. Esperanza knew that Alicia would return to that home someday. Alicia told Esperanza that she is Mango Street. She said, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you will come back to it too” (107). Esperanza did not feel like she had a real home; she did not want the one that Alicia assigned to her either. Eventually she decided that Mango Street is home. Only a person invested in the community will take the time to care and to help improve it. The protagonist’s caring about the community is crucial in an ethnic *bildungsroman* since part of growing up is taking responsibility and caring for others.

Esperanza did not want to be Mango Street as Alicia pronounced. Esperanza said, “I don’t ever want to come from here” (106). Although Esperanza did not want to accept her friend’s opinion, she does ponder Alicia’s opinion. Then, Alicia and Esperanza wonder who will make Mango Street better, and they joke that the mayor will not do it. This starts Esperanza thinking that it has to be someone who understands this street and the people on it. She realizes that she is the person who can help, and unwittingly she has identified her goal as a writer. The struggle between the two cultural identities that the ethnic teens face is resolved when they decide to help others in the community. Growing up caused Esperanza to look back at her aunt, her mother, and others and appreciate the sacrifices they had made for her. These sacrifices made it possible for her to succeed. She shows her appreciation by turning back and serving her community. Her maturity caused her to reach out to others and to assist them as she was assisted.

Once Esperanza has her goal, she starts to plan how she can help. Many bums lived on Mango Street. Sure to notice any person suffering, Esperanza evolved into a more mature person with desire to help and understand by reflecting and writing. By reflecting and writing and then

evolving, Esperanza knows she will help herself at the same time she helps others. For example, in “Bums in the Attic,” Esperanza dreams of a house on a hill with gardens. She likes the idea of a hill to be close to the stars and the heavens, free of worry. She wants nothing to do with “last week’s garbage or fear of rats” (87). She vows that she will offer bums a place to stay because she said, “...I know how it is to be without a house” (87). She predicts that helping others will make her very happy. Knowing how to make herself happy and content is the solution to the problems of loneliness, confusion and misunderstanding that she had experienced earlier in life. She figured this out through her writing and reflecting as an artist. This happiness and contentment comes from knowing one’s role in this world, and her role as writer gives her the knowledge she needs to understand and the financial means to help. Remembering the homeless and many others solidifies her goal and allows her to expand her vision.

The House on Mango Street has differences from the Victorian *bildungsroman* as well. Authors deviate from the conventions of the *bildungsroman* to make a point. First of all, Esperanza, the protagonist, does not have faith in the United States society since she has to face stereotypes, which is an additional pressure not present in Victorian stories. She does not feel she is treated fairly, and she wants to be accepted as she is. Second, she struggles with her dual identity of Mexican and American. Although she is searching for her individual identity, like a protagonist in a Victorian *bildungsroman*, she is even more concerned about how her community fares. In some of the vignettes, she speaks about her loss of faith in people, specifically adults. In the majority of the vignettes, however, she focuses on her many neighbors on Mango Street.

Esperanza lost faith in some members of the Mango Street community in two particular instances. The first time she lost faith was when she ran for help from an adult when the boys were demanding kisses from her friend Sally (96-97). They would not return her keys until she

kissed every one of them. When Esperanza ran all the way to Tito's house to tell his mother what he was demanding of her friend Sally, his mom did not do anything to help. She asked Esperanza, "What do you want me to do...call the cops?" (97) Esperanza ran back to the park to save Sally, but Sally told her to go home. Esperanza said, "I wanted to be dead" (97).

A second time she lost faith in some people from her community is when a man demanded a kiss from Esperanza. Sally and all the magazines and books had described kisses as something magical, not something sour and unable to be stopped. Esperanza called out for help from her friend Sally. She said, "Sally, make him stop" (100). The man made her feel trapped, and beyond that, she felt betrayed by her friend who was supposed to meet her there at the tilt-a-whirl. These disappointing and traumatic experiences made her lose faith in some adults. The adults who should have control of what the children are doing, do not seem to care. This symbolizes the government's indifference toward Mexican Americans as well.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros examines how a protagonist could feel like an outsider in her own country and judged for her home when she attends school and tries to balance her two identities, one as a Mexican American and one as a student in a Catholic school. Esperanza had no control over the condition of her house since she was a child. The people outside her community judged her, and she was aware of it, even as a child and as a teen.

For instance, when the nun from school sees Esperanza playing outside her house in the chapter "The House on Mango Street," Esperanza feels ashamed (5). Again, in "A Rice Sandwich," Mother Superior made Esperanza feel ashamed and even cry about where she thought Esperanza lived (45). These two experiences with adults outside her community made her feel small when, ironically, Esperanza had no control over where she lived. The housing

disparity and problems with United States public policy led to Esperanza's shame in her own house.

Another time Esperanza wanted to go home for lunch as several other children did at her school. She asked her mother to write Sister Superior a note to allow this. Sister Superior made Esperanza show her in which house she lived. Esperanza said the following about Sister Superior assuming she lived in the poorest part of town: "That one? she said, pointing to a row of ugly three-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn't my house and started to cry" (45). She had pointed to some dilapidated houses and assumed Esperanza lived there because of her ethnicity. Esperanza cried because she could tell how little Sister Superior thought of her and that she had a low opinion of Mexican Americans. Cisneros may have been making a point about Sister Superior's arrogant demeanor since a nun in charge is called "Mother Superior," not Sister Superior. The embedded layers of social commentary show the urgency that Cisneros feels.

These feelings still bother her today. Cisneros believes that words matter, and labels matter even more. She explains how the terms *Latina* and *Latino* make her so happy. She saw these words on a bookstore and entered it feeling positive. She then met a clerk who directed her to the Hispanic literature, and she felt she had to explain the meanings of *Latina/Latino* versus *Hispanic* labels. She said that the term *Hispanic* refers to Spain and people from that area. The history with the Spanish taking over Mexico is a negative that Cisneros would rather forget, so this influences her desire to be called *Latina*, not *Hispanic*. It bothers Cisneros when people call her, a Mexican-American, by the term *Hispanic*. She believes that it does matter, and she believes generalizing about a person by the way a person looks makes that person an object, an "other," or a non-human. She believes strongly about this and hopes to change it. Sandra

Cisneros believes every word counts, so she gets upset when people describe her as a *Hispanic*. She is a *Latina*. She feels the word *Hispanic* conjures up images of slavery and defeat, and when United States citizens continue to use this word, it seems like they do not care whether or not a group of people is thought of as defeated or as slaves. Language is powerful, and when people think of a group as defeated, they treat that group like they are defeated. This would take away hope that Cisneros desperately desires for her fellow Mexican Americans.

The word choice is another layer of social commentary about which Cisneros feels strongly. The United States government used the term Hispanic for over thirty years. Cisneros said that the word Hispanic makes her skin crawl. In an article in *The Washington Post*, Darryl Fears explains the difference between *Hispanic* and *Latino/Latina*. He wrote, "The term *Hispanic* was given prominence by the Nixon administration more than 30 years ago when it was added to the census questionnaire in 1970." Cisneros does not want a name given by the government. In the article, she said, "To me, it's like a slave name. I'm a Latina." Many Mexican Americans feel let down by the United States government because they feel that more could be done to help their communities escape the poverty and marginalization, and accepting the name *Hispanic* represents accepting the poor treatment they have experienced for the past thirty years.

The first step toward helping a community get fair or better treatment is listening to what they want. Being careful to examine exactly how a community feels about a label is an important part of fair and considerate treatment. Many of the Mexican Americans feel strongly about what they are called. Luis Rodriguez, author, said, "Hispanic doesn't work for me because it's about people from Spain. I'm Mexican, and we were conquered by people from Spain, so it's kind of an insult" (qtd. in Fears). Even though it is difficult to learn the background of each group and what they prefer to be called, this is the first step towards understanding one another. Cisneros gets

this point across in this story about Esperanza and Sister Superior in just a few pages in the chapter “A Rice Sandwich.” The problems in the novel remain today, and this keeps the book important and current.

Second, in an ethnic *bildungsroman*, the protagonist wants to change the situation of his or her neighbors. Esperanza is trying to leave, but she cannot just forget those neighbors. She understands how trapped they feel. At the end of the book, Esperanza is promising to come back “For the ones who cannot out” (110). She has that burden on her that if she succeeds, she must help others. She is not leaving for herself. She is leaving so that she can help the others. She said, “They will not know I have gone away to come back” (110). This is similar to the Victorian *bildungsroman* in that Esperanza searches for a new life, but it is even more different because she is only leaving to improve the station of her community, not to start a new life for herself only like Pip or Jane Eyre. This desire to leave, succeed, and come back to help others is a common thread between the three novels. The difficulties in society pushed these characters to rebel, but their maturity brought them back to help others. Protagonists in an ethnic *bildungsroman* have further work to do even after succeeding themselves.

Third, Esperanza struggles with her dual identity, that of her Mexican American community (Mexican) and the greater community outside of Mango Street (American). Cisneros was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1954. In the story, Mango Street is in Chicago. Cisneros loves her Mexican community, but others outside her community make it difficult for her to have a positive self-image.

In one chapter, Esperanza speaks about how she is treated outside of her community. The chapter that makes this struggle for confidence clear is “My Name.” In this chapter Esperanza tells the history of her name, how she was named after her great-grandmother and how her great-

grandmother was a strong woman. She said, “I would have like to meet her, a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn’t marry” (10-11). When Esperanza hears her name in Spanish, she said it “is made out of a softer something, like silver” (11). When she hears it at school, she thinks it sounds funny and painful. She said, “At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth” (11). Wanting to fit in at school and in her community is having a dual identity, having a stake in more than one place. This internal conflict that results is typical of the three novels.

Alberto Sandoval addresses the internal conflict that is typical of the three novels studied here. In his article “Dolores Prida’s *Coser y cantar*: Mapping the Dialects of Ethnic Identity and Assimilation,” he explains the dual identity of ethnic teens. He wrote that if a character or a person would “follow...advice of forgetting the past, she would be much more prone to instant assimilation” (214). But assimilation is not the goal of a character or a person with a dual identity. He continues discussing the goal for a person with two identities: Latino and Anglo. He said the goal is “...to bridge, overlap, and merge cultural borders...” (214). What Sandoval believes is that a person with a dual identity wants to merge and bridge the two sides of themselves, not lose one side so that he or she can fit in.

Esperanza felt pressure to assimilate and lose her Mexican identity. She wanted her teachers and classmates to appreciate the following: her name, how she wanted to be strong like her great-grandmother, and for the person she is, both sides of herself. Instead she felt like they experienced pain and trouble every time they pronounced her long name. She felt her name did not fit. She said, “I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (11). From this statement, one can see a common theme of feeling overlooked and misunderstood instead of feeling accepted and appreciated.

Even though Esperanza feels overlooked and ostracized at times, she has happy moments with her sister. In the short chapter “Laughter,” Cisneros explains her negative self-image as an ethnic student. She compares the laugh of the other girls to “shy ice cream bells’ giggle” while she considers her laugh “sudden and surprised like a pile of dishes breaking” (17). In this same chapter, Esperanza sees a house that reminds her of houses she had seen in Mexico. She tells her sister that “it looks like Mexico” (18). The other girls looked at Esperanza like she was crazy, but her sister Nenny said, “That’s what I was thinking exactly” (18). This is similar to the way Cisneros in Chicago was tested by her new surroundings and made to feel like she was the one who did not fit in. Esperanza wants to merge her two sides in “Laughter” and feel whole and understood, not crazy.

The authors studied here are not the only authors to feel misunderstood; the dual identity of ethnic protagonists shows up in many stories, including Prida’s *Coser y cantar*. In this bilingual monologue, the Latina main character “Ella” speaks to her Anglo inner self “She.” Sandoval explores these negative feelings of dual identity. He examines a few voices from Latina writers and how they move between two cultures. Each one has to either silence her inner voice and assimilate or speak out and resist (216). According to Sandoval, the Latina character Ella from the book *Coser y cantar* is searching for home like Esperanza. Ella feels uprooted from her home and feels like she is in exile in the United States (216). Sandoval notices that Ella with her dual identity has to negotiate her two sides. He wrote, “On the one hand, she attempts to accommodate her Latina selfhood into the Anglo environment and, on the other, to adjust the Anglo ego into her Latina cultural past” (216). Sandoval believes the dual identity of Latina writers causes added pressure. He believes it adds “...hesitancies, anxieties, discrepancies,

differences, and wishes...” (216). Many protagonists struggle with doubts, guilt, and mixed feelings in ethnic *bildungsromane*.

Another difference about this book compared with traditional *bildungsroman* is the non-chronological timeline. This book is written as Esperanza is looking back, not as she is experiencing life; however, the verbs are in the present tense. Even though she is looking back, she is writing in the present tense, which makes the action seem more immediate. Because of the present tense of the verbs, readers feel like they are right with Esperanza as she experiences and writes about her neighborhood through a child’s eyes. For example, Esperanza did not say that “they *said* my name funny as if they syllables were made of tin.” She said, “At school they *say* my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin” (11). The present tense of the verbs makes the reader feel like the situation is more immediate. This is not a problem that happened long ago; it is a problem now. Even though she is looking back in the story, she has it happening as the reader reads it. It has a much more urgent tone because of her choice of verb tense. The verb tense intensifies the first person point of view that Cisneros, Alexie, and Yang use.

The conventions Cisneros chose for this novel that readers have embraced for more than twenty-five years included parts of the successful Victorian *bildungsroman* and added a few of her own. The time between childhood and adulthood is universal and pivotal, and books about this time in a person’s life are appealing. When Cisneros created an artist protagonist, like that of the specific *bildungsroman*, the *kunstlerroman*, the protagonist had a higher goal than most protagonists, and this makes the novel stand out. Even back in the twentieth century, readers wanted that more spiritual development. She wanted to encourage women to stand on their own two feet and fight against stereotypes, and she led the way by writing this book and explaining her philosophies inside. Beyond what other novels included before her, she made the poverty

and struggles real by describing person after person on her street in short, poignant vignettes.

What seems at first read to be such a simple book is actually rich and carefully layered. A person needs to read and re-read *The House on Mango Street* to fully appreciate and to fully grasp the many ideas Cisneros placed inside.

Chapter 3: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* as an Ethnic *Bildungsroman*

The second ethnic *bildungsroman* novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, by Sherman Alexie, is the most recent of the three novels. Alexie takes several qualities of Victorian *bildungsroman* and adds a few of his own to create a new genre. In this chapter, I will examine *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* to look for the qualities Alexie used from the Victorian *bildungsroman*. In ethnic *bildungsroman*, authors include concerns and worries about society. Four additional qualities in ethnic *bildungsroman* *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* are having a protagonist as artist, struggling with a dual identity, fighting racism and stereotypes, having concern for the ethnic community, and using a non-chronological timeline. The protagonist realizes the sacrifices made on his behalf and becomes a bridge-builder between the two communities as he matures. The appreciation leads to the return to the community to help. The protagonist faces stereotypes and has to battle every day. Before examining the qualities of *Diary*, I will review some background on the book, some signs of its time period, the current news, and new format. These many additions help make *Diary* a noteworthy book.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian was published in 2007 and includes issues important to Native Americans today. For example, economic hardships cause many problems. Blood quantum laws came about so that the U.S. government could define membership in tribes. Regulations from the government are problematic because values and goals of the dominant society are different from the values and goals of Native Americans (Kuhlmann 136). Another instance where the values clash is when museums and research facilities have sacred artifacts and human remains (137). The dominant culture unearths and

claims these items that Native Americans feel belong to the tribes. Controversies such as these have grown in the last twenty years.

Like other ethnic *bildungsromane*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* adopts components of the traditional *bildungsroman*, popular in the late nineteenth century. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* includes four components that are the same in Victorian *bildungsroman*. First, the novel has many autobiographical aspects. Secondly, the novel focuses on money and the freedom that money could bring. The protagonist sees money as a way out of poverty just as protagonists in the Victorian times did. Third, the novel includes the protagonist having an epiphany or two. The epiphany changes the course of the protagonist's life in some way. Fourth, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* has a hopeful ending, but it is not a decisive closure. These elements borrowed from the traditional format help Alexie make his urgent messages heard.

First, autobiographical aspects are a similarity between Victorian *bildungsroman* and ethnic *bildungsroman*. Alexie's life and Junior's life have many similarities. First of all, Alexie and Junior have two qualities in common: they both have hydrocephalus and both love to read (Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey 1). Both of these qualities brought teasing and bullying. "As a result of his physical deformities and interest in books, Alexie was frequently taunted, ostracized, and beaten up by other children on the reservation"(2). Junior, like Alexie, got beat up so much that he decided to leave the reservation in Washington to attend a "white" school twenty-two miles away where he played basketball (2). Junior said, "I always felt like a stranger" (Alexie 118). Even though in the book Junior is alone and without friends, Alexie said one difference between his life and Junior's life is that he did have many white friends (Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey 3). His ability to befriend everyone comes across in his humorous style. "His comedy

sparks the surprise of reconnections... As he maps the intimate psychological and social violence of Indian-white relation, he not only humanizes that history of grief, but he minimizes it by showing how humor can survive even death” (Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey 98). This ability to make an unhappy story positive reaches a greater number of people than if the story were too sad or too realistic. The first person point of view also helps the reader feel connected to Junior as he explains his predicaments.

By focusing on the human spirit, Sherman Alexie has an intended audience of more than Native Americans, and he has the goal of educating his audience and critiquing the United States policies that harm the American Indians (Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey 7). He wants people to accept others who are different. Alexie takes anger and imagination and creates art in order to create change and to increase acceptance. In the novel, Alexie’s protagonist Junior explains why he draws. He said, “So I draw because I feel like it might be my only real chance to escape the reservation” (6). Alexie’s book has a purpose similar to Junior’s drawings, to escape poverty or to survive. Junior compares his drawings to lifeboats saving him in a flood. He said, “I think the world is a series of broken dams and floods, and my cartoons are tiny little lifeboats” (6). Alexie and Junior see themselves in a situation where they still have hopes to affect some change, so they persist and press on toward the goal. The imagery shines light into Alexie’s experiences. The autobiographical details are as memorable as the illustrations in the book and reinforce Alexie’s messages. The image of art being a lifeboat shows how the art is a something positive to hang onto, something to keep a person going.

Jan Johnson in her article “Healing the Soul Wound” speaks about the physical, emotional, and mental healing needed for Native Americans. About the emotional and mental healing needed, she reports that Alexie said, “I think Native American literature is the literature

of humiliation and shame” (227). When the first synonyms Sherman Alexie mentions are *humiliation* and *shame*, it gives the idea that the humor is covering much pain. Alexie explains, “The fact is you cannot separate our identity from our pain. At some point it becomes primarily our identity” (227). Since the identity is tied to pain, that will affect the ethnic teen trying to become an adult; therefore, the stories will reflect this suffering. *Diary* reflects the suffering of Junior as he leaves for Reardan High School and as he weeps in loneliness. The term *soul wound* is appropriate since the pain is enduring.

Similar to Cisneros’s, Alexie’s struggles did not end when he became a teen and an adult. The Native Americans are a part of him, and he wants to be accepted for the person he is and was. In fact, he wants this for all people because he remembers the feeling of “not fitting in” at the Gonzaga University as a person of color on scholarship. Heather Bruce, Anna Baldwin, and Christabel Umphrey in their article “Where Life and Art Intersect” said, “Alexie was not enamored with the social environment at Gonzaga, where the students were predominantly white and privileged” (3-4). As a result of not fitting in, Alexie “was drinking heavily, so he dropped out of school, moved to Seattle, and worked in a restaurant as a busboy” (4). All of these feelings of wanting to be accepted in grade school, high school, college, and even beyond come out in this autobiographical book that is full of raw emotion. Alexie, through Junior, explores why the dominant society rejects anyone who is different.

Since Alexie has been mistreated and marginalized in his life, he turns to writing to make sense of it all and to try to improve the situation for others.

Alexie thinks that imagination fueled by anger can counteract the effect of outrage by offering hope and aggressively challenging the status quo. To challenge mainstream culture, Alexie realizes, one needs to be passionately, even furiously inspired. There is no way to empowerment except through rage transformed constructively via art. (Grassian 30)

The many circumstances of Alexie's youth on the reservation cause much hurt and anger. Either Alexie could give up and let his hurt and anger fester, or he could rebel against society and stand up for himself. He chose the latter and channeled his anger into his writing. He, like Junior, felt his art would save him and that each chapter would allow him to rise above the negativity and hopelessness. Doing something creates a feeling of power and accomplishment even when the end goal is not apparent.

Alexie's book seems funny on the surface, but he wrote with such urgency that one must look past the humor and find the meaning. Junior laughs at himself, but inside he really wants to fit in and be accepted. Beyond acceptance, he wants his community to be treated better by the United States government. This is what drives him, and this is the message in the book. Although the autobiographical qualities are similar to those in Victorian *bildungsroman*, ethnic *bildungsroman* stories have more than a person coming-of-age; they have a person trying to improve the ethnic community's situation by speaking out.

Alexie released his pent-up feelings by writing. He fell into writing by mistake but felt like "a light went on" and that he would be a writer from that moment. He finally felt able to speak up after years of feeling silenced. He not only feels mistreated in the United States but also in his community. The difference between the two instances of mistreatment is that Alexie understands why the Native Americans were angry. They have only known mistreatment, so they mistreat in return. Alexie said, "You get treated like shit as a people for hundreds of years, and you get good at treating other people like shit. You get taught very well how to oppress" (Bruce, Baldwin, and Umphrey 2). Alexie left the reservation, but he hopes the people of his community somehow understand that he wanted to leave in order to help, similar to Cisneros. Just as she did not want to be only *Mango Street*, Alexie wanted to speak out for his community even though

some community members mistreated him when he was a child. Alexie understands the problems of the reservation just as Cisneros understands the problems of the barrio. Like Cisneros, Alexie sheds some light on how it feels to be pushed to the margins of society because of racism, stereotypes, or hegemony. The protagonist is pulled between two cultures, and he feels guilty for leaving the rez, even if leaving is the best way to help the community. The writers and the protagonists want to come back to help as only they can understand what is needed. No one can come back and help as well as someone who has been there and understands how the people in the community feel. This leaving, succeeding, and coming back is similar to *The House on Mango Street* and *American Born Chinese*.

In ethnic *bildungsroman* money is an encompassing issue. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, many of Junior's problems in his home-life stem from lack of money. Early in the story, Junior draws pictures of what he feels his parents could have been if only they had had some money; his mom would have gone to college, and his dad would have been a musician (12). Junior continues to be specific about the problems of poverty. For instance, he is hungry, going to bed with nothing for dinner (8). Even worse, his pet mutt Oscar was sick, and since the family did not have any money for his operation, there was nothing they could do to save Oscar (10). Money would give his family and community freedom and choices and even the ability to save the family pet. Without these choices, the Native Americans get stuck in a downward spiral of unemployment and poverty. Junior explained it well when he said the following: "My parents came from poor people who came from poor people who came from poor people, all the way back to the very first poor people" (11). With no precedent of success or seed money to start anything, the impoverished community has no chance to turn the tide.

The lack of money affects Junior's school-life, causing him many problems and hurting his self-image, leading to a lack in confidence. A few examples of problems caused by lack of money are getting to school consistently, getting something to wear to the prom, and paying for a late-night date. Junior has to walk home, hitch-hike, and bum rides to and from school (88). He wore one of his dad's old polyester suits to his prom (121). Finally, Junior gets physically sick when after the prom, everyone goes out to a restaurant, and he does not have any money to pay for his date Penelope's food (119, 123). He is too embarrassed to tell her, and he borrows money from another boy Roger (126). Junior then decides that Roger and his girl should be together. He said, "Roger and Penelope looked good together. They looked natural. They looked like they should be a couple"(124). He no longer feels confident; he feels that he could never be an equal to Penelope because of his ethnicity and his lack of money. The shame and embarrassment of the poverty take a toll on Junior, and the lack of money contributes to his negative self-image and lack of confidence with his peers. All of these stresses from his ethnicity, his lack of money, and his negative self-image force a change in Junior's perspective.

After feeling rejected and overwhelmed with problems and stress, the protagonist experiences some sort of epiphany or two in an ethnic *bildungsroman*. For Junior, one moment of clarity is when his teacher believes in him and in his chances to be somebody, to escape the poverty and alcoholism of the reservation. His teacher encourages him to switch schools and get a fresh start. Mr. P. said, "You have to leave this reservation" (42). When Junior said that he and his dad were going out later, Mr. P. clarified. Mr. P. said, "No, I mean you have to leave the reservation *forever*" (42). Mr. P. was crying and explaining to Junior how everyone on the reservation had given up (42). After that, Junior shocks his parents when he asks to go to Reardan, a white school twenty-two miles away. Getting himself to school became a constant

problem (45-47). Junior could not get to school for many reasons, including the following: he was attending a funeral or a wake, he couldn't find a ride, they had no money in the house for gas, or his dad was not home (174). The lack of money and transportation pale in comparison to the problems Junior faces as his community members shun and attack him for this decision to leave the reservation and attend the rich white school.

Even though Junior still lives on the reservation, he realizes that staying in school on the reservation using thirty-year old books will not end well. Children and even adults on the reservation and in the reservation school have made fun of Junior for his medical issues since he was a young boy. Junior did not think they would miss him if he left. He said, "Nobody would miss me if I was gone" (16). They did not see him for the person he was, a person who wanted to learn and better himself. What was odd on the reservation was typical at Reardan though. The students at Reardan wanted to learn and read and better themselves. Junior summed it up by observing, "Those kids were *magnificent*. They knew *everything*. They were *beautiful*. They were beautiful and smart. They were beautiful and smart and epic. They were filled with hope" (50). At the school Junior is the only Native American other than the mascot, but it is vital for him to go through all the hassle to go clear across town to go to an all-white school to improve his life. The theme of leaving, succeeding, and coming back is in the other two novels as well, and leaving is never easy and often even meets with resistance.

Switching schools is turning point for Junior. Many positive and negative reactions come from this decision as he also loses his best friend Rowdy. Rowdy feels betrayed and left behind. Rowdy is so angry that he yelled, "You always thought you were better than me" (52). Rowdy then punched Junior and then walked away. Leaving the reservation changed everything, and losing his best friend hurts Junior. Before Rowdy knocked him out, Junior said, "I have to go.

I'm going to die if I don't leave" (52). Since Junior lost his best friend to go to Reardan, it is obvious that he is desperate to survive and have hope outside the reservation. This is a physical relocation, but his mental health needs improvement.

Being surrounded by sadness and poverty affects children and teens. They lose hope for a better life when all they see is frustration and unfulfilled dreams. Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* realized this and hoped for a house with decorations and pillows and peace (108). She realized that the environment influences the mind. Junior's environment is the opposite of pillows and peach. He reflects on the poverty and sadness of his environment, too, even relating vignettes, similar to Esperanza's, about lives unfulfilled in his community. Junior names his sister Mary Runs Away to show how she had to escape to achieve her dreams (27). She "killed herself with booze" in her new community, and Junior watched his mom cry for hours at her burial (208). Another person in his community whose dreams were destroyed is Junior's grandmother. Gerald, "a dumb-ass Spokane Indian alcoholic" ran over and killed Junior's grandmother (157). His grandmother wanted the family to forgive Gerald who went to jail for eighteen months before moving to a reservation in California where nobody ever heard from him again (158). Not only did the environment of drinking affect Gerald but it also affected Junior's grandmother, all of Junior's grandmother's family and friends, and the other alcoholic Indians. The deaths from drunk-driving accidents consistently surround Junior.

Even away from the drinking at Reardan High School, Junior strives to escape and find a more positive environment. His friend Penelope feels trapped by her anorexia and wants to escape as well. They feel trapped in the small town with so many limitations. Junior said, "We were supposed to be happy with our limitations. But there was no way Penelope and I were going to sit still. Nope, we both wanted to fly" (112). Even though Junior finds a more positive

environment than the rez at Reardan High School, his desire to be free is not satiated. The ache to achieve presses on his mind without ceasing, and the deep hurt in his psyche becomes more apparent when he recognizes Penelope's similar struggle.

The physical relocation leads to Junior's second epiphany, a mental healing, a healing for his self-image. He starts to understand his place in the world and have confidence in himself. He sees how he fits into many groups: cartoonists, teenage boys, small-town kids, Pacific Northwesterners, beloved sons, and more (217). Once he figured out how he belonged by reflecting and drawing, he wept. He said, "I realized that I might be a lonely Indian boy, but I was not alone in my loneliness. There were millions of other Americans who had left their birthplaces in search of a dream" (217). As soon as he realizes that he fits into society, he wants to go search for his friend Rowdy. He still wants to be a part of his Native American community, and Rowdy is a symbol for that connection. Bridging the gap between cultures solves his dilemma of the dual identity.

His friend Rowdy did not have the desire to leave, but at the end of the book, he was happy for Junior. He accepted Junior, the Junior who wanted new experiences and the Junior who would risk everything in order to reach his goal. Rowdy sums it up by saying he is not nomadic and telling Junior that he is. Rowdy said, "Hardly anybody on this rez is nomadic. Except for you. You're the nomadic one" (229). People left behind have resentment but respect, too. Junior said, "...Rowdy still respected my cartoons. And so maybe he still respected me a little bit" (103). Junior hoped that his community would understand his nomadic tendencies and forgive him for leaving as Rowdy did, and he also hoped he would eventually forgive himself. Junior said, "I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them. I hoped and prayed that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them" (230). Junior feels guilty for

leaving; he feels like a traitor. This ending with forgiveness is hopeful but not decisive, just as ending of a Victorian *bildungsroman* would be.

This ending is similar to the ending of the Victorian *bildungsroman* since it is not decisive but is hopeful. Readers saw this ambiguous ending in *Jane Eyre* as she has more power, but the reader is unsure of her final experiences once she marries (Maier 332). Like Jane, Junior hopes to be free and to be strong. He wants to leave in order to become stronger. He wants to become stronger so that he can come back and help others who are not strong enough to get out of the reservation or to be free. Junior cried for his tribe. He said, “I cried because so many of my fellow tribal members were slowly killing themselves and I wanted them to live. I wanted them to get strong and get sober and get the hell off the rez” (216). Junior feels helpless as his community seems to be stuck in a downward spiral.

Although the ending has forgiveness, the protagonist is not accommodated into society as a protagonist in Victorian times would have been for many reasons. Native Americans feel like they have been forced into small areas and looked down upon. Casinos are the main employment opportunities, and drinking and gambling come from that option. The Native Americans find themselves in an uphill battle to survive. The author struggles with the dominant U.S. society and its policies and long, troubled relationship with the Native Americans. One such conflict is the blood quantum. Lisa Tatonetti in her article “Dancing That Way, Things Began to Change” explains the rhetoric of the policy. She said that it is “an attempt by the U.S. government to codify (and thus limit) tribal membership, regulate Native identities and bodies, and ultimately, control Native lands by legislating indigeneity into ever-diminishing fractions” (6-7). The policy that requires Native Americans to have a certain percentage of blood and membership in a tribe is problematic because as time goes on, less people qualify as Native Americans because of

marrying between tribes. The blood quantum policy ultimately takes rights away from Native Americans. Policies like these make it difficult for Alexie to have faith in the United States government. In fact, he speaks out through his characters about how it feels to be mistreated.

After borrowing the four qualities (autobiography, poverty, epiphany, and ending) from Victorian *bildungsroman*, Sherman Alexie contributes several new aspects to the new ethnic *bildungsroman* genre. He adds the protagonist as artist, and he explains the three reasons Junior drew. Secondly, he adds the problems of stereotypes and racism. Thirdly, he adds the protagonist's concern for the ethnic community. Finally, he includes a dual identity in his protagonist. These four additions made an ethnic *bildungsroman* complex and appealing. Beyond borrowing aspects of the traditional novel, Alexie employs the artist notion from the revised *bildungsromane*.

First, Alexie adds the quality of the protagonist as artist to his novel. Junior drew for three reasons. As he is coming of age, Junior drew to preserve his sanity. He explains why he draws when he says, "I use them to make fun of the world. To make fun of people. And sometimes I draw people because they're my friends and family. And I want to honor them" (95). For example, he drew his sister with her flaws, but he is careful to show how she is valuable and how he admires her. He included Mary's acne scars and said they "somehow make her look tough and pretty at the same time" (27). Junior also drew his teacher Mr. P., Rowdy, and his parents. He drew times when he and Rowdy were having fun as children. He drew for himself. Jeff Berglund in "An Introduction to Sherman Alexie" noted that the drawing and writing for Junior "are important vehicles for expressing and/or understanding his own life" (xii). He was figuring out what was valuable in his identity and remembering the fun times and the

people who were important in his life. Drawing them even with flaws adds to the credibility already created by using the first person point of view.

Another reason Junior drew was to escape. He wanted more than he could experience in reality. He felt trapped in his house because of the constant bullying from the other children on the reservation. They called him “retard” before “pantsing” him or “stuffing his head in the toilet” or “just smacking [him] upside the head” (4). Escaping with his drawing let him express his feelings and overcome his loneliness. Sometimes he gave a picture to someone like when he gave a picture to Rowdy. It gave him a way to communicate with others when he gave them a picture, and it gave him a focus when he felt alone and unable to go outside and play.

Junior explained a third reason why he drew: to solve problems in society. He said, “I draw because words are too unpredictable. I draw because words are too limited.” (5) And finally, he drew because he identified problems and wanted to reach others in order to solve those problems. He felt everyone could understand a drawing whereas writing only reaches the people who speak your same language. He said, “If you speak or write in English, or Spanish, or Chinese, or any other language, then only a certain percentage of human beings will get your meaning” (5). Then he said, “...when you draw a picture, everybody can understand it” (5).

As first seen in the *kunsterroman*, this quality of an artist in an ethnic *bildungsroman* is a valuable aspect of a successful story. In *Writing beyond the Ending*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis finds art to be a strong resistance to silence in *kunsterroman*. She said, “Because it is precisely expression and the desire to refuse silence that are at issue in artistic creation, the contradiction between dominant and muted areas can also be played out in the motif of the imbedded artwork, another narrative marker of these *Kunsterromane*” (85). The dominant majority and the silenced

minority are played out in *Diary*. The artwork in the novel extends and emphasizes the motif of feeling marginalized or ostracized.

Another additional quality is caring for the ethnic community. Junior focuses on a few problems that he sees about his community. The first is the mistreatment of Native Americans and the resulting low self-esteem. By drawing and reflecting, Junior is able to express what he feels is specifically the problem with how the Native Americans are treated: negative self-image. This perpetual low self-image becomes nihilism, or deep despair, if the character or person becomes overwhelmed and unable to escape. In an ethnic *bildungsroman*, the protagonist wants to change the situation of his people. Junior is leaving to get away from the bullying and teasing because of his medical issues. He said he was considered cute until he was about eight years old. After that, his life became difficult. Junior said, "...you're still fairly cute when you're a stuttering and lisping six-, seven-, and eight-year-old, but it's all over when you turn nine and ten" (4). Even though he is leaving for school, he still lives on the reservation. He feels the burden that if he succeeds, he must help others. He is leaving so that he can help himself and the others. This is similar to the Victorian *bildungsroman* in that Junior searches for a new life, but it is very different because he is also leaving to improve the station of his community. While leaving home is a typical event in a *bildungsroman*, having concern beyond the personal is an extra hurdle.

Junior is desperate to change his life. Since Junior did leave the reservation, he turns the negative feelings around. At first, Junior still has the low self-image when he feels out of place at Reardan High School. Junior says, "I was still a stranger in a strange land" (81). He asks Rowdy how he could fit in, and Rowdy tells him that he needs to change everything in order to be

accepted. Rowdy says to change the way Junior looks, talks, and walks (81). Junior and Rowdy, both children of Native Americans living on a reservation, feel like they are not good enough.

Jan Johnson in her article “Healing the Soul Wound” shows how Junior resists the negative self-image by leaving the reservation and eventually feeling like he was good enough. She writes, “In *Diary* rejecting alcohol and even the reservation becomes for Arnold an act of resistance to ongoing colonialism and cultural genocide” (236). So, although Arnold/Junior felt out of place at Reardan, he made the first step to escape the colonialism and cultural genocide by leaving the reservation. It was not easy for him, but eventually, after he made the basketball team and gained Penelope’s admiration, the students at Reardan accepted him. This acceptance begins to build his self-esteem and make a difference in his life. He will then be able to lift other Native Americans up and show them a way to escape, a way to gain acceptance, or a way to forgive. By giving hope to others and by becoming that bridge between the communities, Junior can begin to heal his spirit.

Third, the negative self-image that many ethnic teens feel comes from racism and stereotypes, which Junior sees at Reardan. Penelope’s father Earl did not see Junior as a person, only as a Native American “other.” As a result, Penelope’s father does not want her to date Junior. He told Junior, “Kid, if you get my daughter pregnant, if you make some charcoal babies, I’m going to disown her. I’m going to kick her out of my house and you’ll have to bring her home to your mommy and daddy. You hearing me straight, kid?” (109-110) Not only did he refuse to call Junior by his name, he threatened him and insinuated that his daughter was only dating Junior to make him mad. The other students saw Junior as an “other” when he first arrived at the school. They ignored Junior and called him names like “Chief,” “Redskin,” and “Sitting

Bull” (63). The students and even their parents relied on stereotypes and saw Junior as an Indian, not as a human being.

Protagonists face the problems of hegemony and stereotypes in ethnic *bildungsromane*. Most of the students at Reardan High School see Native Americans as a savage or an “other.” Junior summarizes it by saying the following: “...I was a reservation Indian, and no matter how geeky and weak I appeared to be, I was still a potential killer. So mostly they called me names. Lots of names” (63). Stereotypes like this keep the majority from accepting the ethnic teen. This is hegemony, a way to keep the majority group in power and to keep the ethnic teen in the margins. Ethnic *bildungsroman* stories contest with the hegemony that perpetuates ethnic stereotypes.

Authors like Sherman Alexie and others make a point about society, and his point is that the United States policies are alienating Native Americans, causing them pain and grief that is difficult to overcome. After Junior mourns the loss of his grandmother, he starts to make lists so that he can feel better. He creates his own coping mechanisms, and writing and drawing are free and effective. Jeff Burgland in his article “An Introduction to Sherman Alexie” suggests the list-making helps Junior bring little pieces of joy back into his life. He made lists of favorite foods, favorite basketball players, and favorite books. Burgland noticed that the books had common themes where Alexie tried to “explore the experience of being disenfranchised or alienated and the desire to find a home, a place to belong” (xv). The dual identity of ethnic teens must be embraced to end racism and stereotypes, and, as a result, end the alienation that keeps ethnic teens grieving.

Diary has a fourth addition or difference from the Victorian *bildungsroman* as well—a protagonist with a dual identity. When teaching *Diary*, Heather Bruce, Anna Baldwin, and

Christabel Umphrey have classes think “about racial, cultural, geographic, or religious differences” (122). Having a dual identity means walking in two worlds at once. Sometimes these identities clash, and sometimes they agree. Sometimes the rules of each world conflict and make decisions difficult (123). Junior has one foot in one culture and one foot in the other culture. In an ethnic *bildungsroman*, these characters have the opportunity to see life more clearly than a character in only one culture. This dual identity in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* pulls Junior in opposite directions and gives him feelings of guilt, which is something that is not present in a Victorian *bildungsroman*.

In *Diary*, Junior struggles with his dual identity. In fact, Junior feels he has more than two identities. He feels a part of many groups. Some of the groups are humorous like the “tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers.” Some are sad like “the tribe of funeral-goers.” And some show how torn he is with his foot in two cultures. He is in “...the tribe of boys that missed their best friends” (217). Alexie is poking fun at the groups the U.S. society establishes in this section of *Diary*. When society tries to get the ethnic teens to abandon half of themselves, this is a huge problem for teens with dual-identities. Not only are the group labels arbitrary, but many times the majority tries to squelch the minority entirely. Mr. P. saw this as a problem that Junior needed to get away from. He said, “We were trying to kill the Indian culture” (35). Mr. P. was removed enough from the situation to see the big picture, and encouraging Junior to leave was a turning point in the story.

Although he is searching for his individual identity, like a protagonist in a Victorian *bildungsroman*, he is always concerned about how his community fares, like in a *kunstlerroman*, and Rowdy, his best friend, is part of that community. Junior worries about the drinking and the depression. He feels the lack of money and the lack of compassion from the government cause

pain and sadness. During the summer, Junior misses his white friends, but at the same time, he wonders whether or not they miss him, too. He thinks about his love interest Penelope and hopes she thinks about him. He said, “I’d already written her three love letters. I hoped she’d write me back” (227). At the same time, he was lonely and bored on the reservation, far away from Penelope, the white girl friend he had made in school, and Gordy, his other favorite person at Reardan. Gordy helps Junior navigate the world of Reardan and even teaches him about books and life. He advises that Junior should “approach each book – you should approach life—with the real possibility that you might get a metaphorical boner at any point” (97). Gordy even stuck up for Junior twice. Once when a teacher made a negative comment about how much school Junior missed, Gordy led a walk-out and started it by dropping his book on the floor (175). Another time Gordy spoke up and told the science teacher that Junior did have the right answer about petrified wood (84-85). It only takes a few people to turn everyone around. Once Penelope starts to date him and Gordy befriends him, people start to accept Junior. Other girls think he is cute, other boys think he is a stud, and even teachers start to pay attention to him (110). Alexie wanted to get the solution in the book, but the ending is ambiguous. The systemic problem of racism, a system of privilege bases on race, is not easily solved. The story of Junior’s coming-of-age shows the personal struggles the systemic problems have on a young adult.

Finally, Alexie uses flashback in his book, adding another layer of interest to his novel. Junior remembers his sister as Mr. P. describes her as a student with dreams (40). Junior recalls how she went from a basement dweller to an adventurous risk-taker. She read romances and secretly wrote stories until she met a man, fell in love with him, and moved across the country to start her new life (90-91). Unfortunately, her trailer caught on fire, and she died, but Junior admires her courage and tenacity.

Alexie takes his anger and imagination and creates a noteworthy book. By borrowing qualities of the Victorian *bildungsroman*, such as autobiographical elements, concern about money, epiphany moments, and an ambiguous yet hopeful ending. Secondly, he added elements such as a protagonist artist, a protagonist dealing with stereotypes and racism, a protagonist trying to save his community, a protagonist with a dual identity, and non-chronological literary elements. These atypical elements of the *bildungsroman* make *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* especially meaningful. By having Junior draw, Alexie shows one way to heal the deep pain in his psyche while experiencing mistreatment. Since Alexie is angered by racism and stereotypes, he draws attention to these problems in the book to spur change. The way Junior tries to save his community makes the book idealistic and positive despite the many deaths and sad situations. Junior becomes a bridge-builder instead of a victim. The struggle with identity conflicts appeals to many young adults who feel more than one way at one time. These differences impact decision-making, and Alexie hopes to influence young adults in this process. Not only does Alexie affect the young adults, he impacts the society that holds strong to the vision of a “typical” American. Alexie wants to expand that vision and connect people. The atypical elements of *Diary* stay with the reader long after reading the book.

Chapter 4: *American Born Chinese* as an Ethnic *Bildungsroman*

For his mythical novel, Yang borrows three of the components of the Victorian *bildungsroman* like Cisneros and Alexie did: autobiographical details, epiphanies, and ambiguous but hopeful endings. Even though *American Born Chinese* has these similar conventions from Victorian *bildungsroman*, it differs from the other two novels *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* and *The House on Mango Street* in a few ways. For example, in the other two novels, the protagonist is an artist helping others in the community, and in this one, the artist is the author and the community helper is an animal. Second, Yang is the only author who uses magic as a literary device. Third, the format is different because of the three strands and the graphic novel format. Finally, in *American Born Chinese*, money is not a major focus either. Despite these omissions and changes, all three novels fit into the genre of the ethnic *bildungsroman* because some of the added pressures are similar to Junior's and Esperanza's. The protagonists in all three books confront racism, stereotypes, and dual identity issues. Additionally, Yang uses the non-chronological timeline. All of these issues are found in an ethnic *bildungsroman*. The dual identity issue is ironic and stands out in this novel.

First of all, autobiographical aspects are a similarity between Victorian *bildungsroman* and ethnic *bildungsroman* in *American Born Chinese*. The first strand is about the Monkey King. Although Yang loved the Chinese story of the Monkey King, he said American culture took over every crevice in his home while growing up. This is Yang's first point: that assimilating is a negative. His parents wanted to embrace American culture, and he adapted. He had given up on the Monkey King and became a fan of Batman and Spiderman instead. It was not until college when he found a book called *Journey to the West* on his roommate's shelf that he thought again about the Monkey King. Yang started to read his roommate's book, and he thought back to his

mother and the Monkey King stories. He said this about the book and the Monkey King: “I borrowed it and began hearing my mother’s stories again. I had rejoined the Monkey Kingdom. Since then, I’ve written and drawn several Monkey King stories, one of which serves as a third of my graphic novel *American Born Chinese*” (Yang, “Monkey Kingdom”). These autobiographical references in the novel show the urgency Yang feels. He regrets trying to fit in and leaving behind stories that were special to his family. The way Yang brings the Monkey King into his story shows how he is now more confident and able to embrace his ethnic tradition and even create his own. Yang created a few Monkey King stories, but he has only published one. When he rediscovered *Journey to the West* in college, he regretted putting this family story aside. When he did release the story, he wanted it to have a large impact, so he worked hard to release the best one as one of the three parts of *American Born Chinese* (Yang, “GeneYang.com”).

A second trait in *American Born Chinese* that is similar to the Victorian *bildungsroman* is the epiphany. Jin Wang and Pip in *Great Expectations* realized how unpredictable life is, especially when someone is manipulating situations as the convict and the Monkey King were. The first strand of the novel is about Jin Wang. His epiphany happened when the herbalist laughed at his dream to be a transformer. This foreshadows and symbolizes Jin Wang’s change that will improve how he treats others. She told him that he could be anything he desired if only he would sell his soul to do it. Jin Wang would not understand her comment until the end of the book after he did “sell his soul.” Jin wanted to fit in so desperately that he mistreats another Asian American student, Wei-Chen, after he arrives at school. Jin Wang transformed from being an outcast with deep pain in his spirit to a more confident young man interested in a female student. Even though Jin Wang suffered when he first arrived at the new school, he did not help

the new student, Wei-Chen. At the end of the book, after Chin-Kee reveals his true identity to be the Monkey King, Jin Wang looks back on his experience with Wei-Chen and wishes he could go back and be kind. The transformation/epiphany is complete when Jin Wang stopped and reflected on his actions and then tries to contact Wei-Chen to apologize.

Later in the story, in the second strand, the reader realizes that Danny (a white student) is also Jin Wang. Jin Wang wished to be white for so long, he actually became a white version of himself named Danny. This wish to be white comes from the accepted notion that a “typical” American is a white person only. Continued wishes to be white lead to self-hatred and internalized racism. At the end of the book, Jin Wang/Danny realizes that he gave up everything, ethics, kindness, appearance, and even his soul, to get a girl’s attention and to fit in. Pip in *Great Expectations* also gave up everything to please Miss Havisham (Dickens 116). To make up for his lack of kindness, Jin Wang reaches out to Chin-Kee at the end by trying to have cream tea with him in a diner (226-233). These two strands of the novel join together since Jin Wang and Danny are the same character but have opposing views. Another reason the two strands come together is that they both try to fit in, and they have the Monkey King in common. The Monkey King, actually Chin-Kee, visited Danny every year, similar to how the convict came back to see Pip again and again. The Monkey King’s son visited Jin Wang at his school. The final reason for the split in the story is to show how the ethnic teen feels split into his psyche. On one side, he wants to be accepted as he is. On the other side, he feels the pain of rejection from a society full of prejudice. Bringing the stories together at the end foreshadows the goal of building a bridge between the two sides and the two communities.

In the third strand of the story, Monkey King has an epiphany. This part of the story is creative and outlandish when the Monkey King urinates on columns that become the fingers of

God. At this point in the story, the Monkey King has too much pride and does not hear what God is telling him. In the story, God tells the Monkey King, “I do not make mistakes, Little Monkey. A monkey I intended you to be, a monkey you are” (81). The epiphany that the Monkey King missed at first is that God does not create junk. The Monkey King is perfect just the way he is. Despite the advice to be happy as he is, the Monkey King did not get the message then. Under a pile of rocks for a long time, the Monkey stayed trapped as a punishment. This could represent how long Asian Americans have been in the United States and still not realizing how valuable they are. After the five-hundred years passed by, a monk came to him and asked for his help. He asked, “Dear disciple, please free yourself quickly. My arms are thin and weak. I cannot bear this burden alone much longer” (143). The monk not bearing the load alone could also symbolize the Asian American community. The community needs to work together to stand up to the majority and turn the self-hatred around. The Monkey King did not want to help the monk at first. Many Asian Americans do not want to stand up for the community and stand out; they want to fit in and be accepted. The Monkey King even watched demons stab and start to cook the monk before he swallowed his pride and helped the monk. Then, he fought off the demons and became a slave to the monk for the rest of the monk’s life (148-160). When the ethnic teen learns and matures, he begins to realize what the older people in the community did to help him succeed. He then wants to turn around and help the community just as Monkey King wanted to help the monk (159-160). The monk helped him realize what is important in life, so the Monkey King wanted to pay him back and help the community.

Not only are humility and reflection/mindfulness important aspects of life, they are tenets of Buddhism, too (Lam). Yang changed Buddha into God in the Monkey King part of the story but also kept the gods from the original tale (Yang, “Gene Yang.com”). Yang is mixing

Asian/Chinese and Western religions and (re)creating a new tradition. About Monkey King, he said the following:

At its heart, *The Journey to the West* is a Buddhist morality tale. In the original, the Monkey King raises havoc among the gods of all other traditional Chinese religions, and it is only the Buddha that is finally able to put him in his place. In *American Born Chinese*, I've replaced the story's Buddhist underpinnings with Christian ones, drawing from my own faith. (Yang, "GeneYang.com")

In addition to the Buddhist tenets, Yang includes Christian ideas as well. For example, the Monkey King's son volunteers to serve as an emissary for humans. After he witnesses Jin Wang's behavior, he gives up on humans and becomes selfish. This is a departure from Christianity, but Yang is bold and creative in his novel.

Another bold and creative method is combining three seemingly unrelated stories in the end. The ending of *American Born Chinese* ties all three strands together by revealing the dual identities. Chin-Kee is actually the Monkey King, Danny is actually Jin Wang, and Wei-Chen is actually the Monkey King's son. First, when Danny knocks Chin-Kee's head off in a fight, the Monkey King reveals that Wei-Chen is his son (212-216). Second, Monkey King also says that Jin Wang's behavior made Wei-Chen lose faith in humanity (219). Jin Wang realizes the error of his ways and tries to meet with Wei-Chen in a diner (223-229). Eventually Wei-Chen met with Jin Wang in a restaurant that served cream tea (230-231). Jin Wang waited for him several nights before he came, but at the end the reader is not sure what they are discussing or what the future will hold (233). This is similar to *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* since both protagonists have improved their lives, but the future is still unknown. It does look positive, so the ending is similar to a Victorian *bildungsroman* ending since it is not decisive but is hopeful.

Another hopeful aspect is when a character cares about his or her community. *American Born Chinese* is different from *The House on Mango Street* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a*

Part-time Indian in that helping the community is not an obvious theme. Even though *American Born Chinese* is not a perfect match to the other novels, the idea of helping the community is there with the Monkey King; this is an important element in an ethnic *bildungsroman*. This strand of the story contains the caring about the community element since the community of monkeys develops a self-love and caring aspect. Monkey King had too much pride when he went against the god of the gods, so he was made to wait under a pile of rocks for five hundred years (84). While serving his time under the pile of rocks, the Monkey King had time to think about what matters. He decides that respecting the gods is important, and that he must have a balance of pride and humility. After he changes his ways, his son wants to follow in his footsteps and be an emissary for God (216). Monkey King helped the community in another way since he inspired Jin Wang to have concern for his community. Jin Wang after realizing how poorly he treated Wei-Chen, tries to make amends (226-233). The ending is ambiguous, but Jin Wang will not have that desire to be white anymore. He will not mistreat others. Although it is different from the other ethnic *bildungsromane* because the character helping out is a monkey, Yang does keep the element of a protagonist helping the community.

Another way this novel differs from the traditional *bildungsroman* is the format. Again, the first noticeable format difference is the story has three parts that come together in the end. This could symbolize the way different cultures could combine yet keep their individual values. The splitting of the story and then bringing it all together at the end is ironic. Ronald Takaki, in his book *Strangers from a Different Shore*, noticed that *Asianweek* reported that “the Asian American culture is connected to its roots and honored as a uniquely American creation” (503). Yang agrees that Asian Americans are a unique creation, and by showing how well the three stories work together, he is showing how different cultures could also work together. For

example, he combines Buddhism and Christianity in the Monkey King strand of the story to make his own unique creation. Each of the three stories is interesting on its own, but together they provide much more. In two strands of this combination story, the readers experience a teen's life as an Asian American and as a white person. In the third strand, the readers see the Monkey King treated as an outsider, too. Three points of view make a much bigger impact than one. And, the surprise endings resonate with ethnic teens who have suffered a great divide in their own minds as they cope with stereotypes and hegemony.

Another deviation from the traditional *bildungsroman* is that *American Born Chinese* is a graphic novel. In this graphic novel, Yang included images he drew when he was in elementary school. He realizes that images are more memorable and reach more people, and even if the images are negative, like Chin-Kee. Yang has faith in his readers to understand his points. The extreme image of Chin-Kee drooling through his buck teeth and peering out with yellow eyes is memorable (120). The passion many ethnic writers feel about marginalization pushes them into book formats that reach more readers and even more importantly, get them to better understand the author's life experience and what it may feel like growing up. Pictures help convey emotions that may be hard to describe. For example, drawing Wei-Chen with earrings, sunglasses, a gold chain, and puffing on a cigarette gives an immediate impression in one small graphic (231). Another time a picture is better than words is when a white boy was pulling on his eyes, making fun of Danny and Chin-Kee (121). The picture is more effective because the way the two teens are laughing and making faces quickly shows exactly what Jin Wang experienced.

Additional elements such as pictures reinforce the message of the story, cause readers to spend more time on each page, and even identify with the characters. Readers "identify more readily with characters drawn in this style [cartoonish] than characters that resemble a reality of

their own” (Boatright 472). The exaggerated features of cartoons keep the reader from considering the graphic novel to be like a mirror. Instead, the reader looks for personality traits they may have in common. In order to change society, artists draw or write to reflect and come up with ideas to better the society, hoping people begin to look past appearances. Instead of the protagonist drawing or writing like the ones in the other two novels, Yang the author draws. The drawing helps emphasize his points, causes people to stop and look at the page longer, and even identify with the characters.

Beyond the different format, the financial situation stands out as the next major difference between this book and the other two, *Mango* and *Diary*. After adding graphics and three strands of the story, Yang has another difference between his and the other two novels. His novel examines the lack of power money brings to ethnic families. Yang wants to open the eyes of the readers to the stereotypes and hegemony. When a group is treated as an “other” or “non-human,” everyone loses. Each person is valuable as he or she is, not when he or she assimilates and loses everything that makes that person special or different.

In ethnic *bildungsroman* money is an issue, but in *American Born Chinese*, the lack of money is not an issue; the futility of money is. Yang includes hopes that money would help him become accepted, but his ethnicity proves to be a bigger barrier than the money. This specific quality of protagonist trying to fit in is usually found in the ethnic *bildungsroman*, but the focus of money is slightly different in *American Born Chinese*. In the first strand of the story, Yang presents a time when money, no matter how much, would not allow a person to be accepted. The Monkey King wants to attend a lavish party for the gods. This symbolizes the way many ethnic teens feel when they want to break into the main group of students at school but are kept out or ignored or even rejected. It also can apply to immigrants. Just like when Asians arrived at Angel

Island to come into the United States, the Monkey King is excluded for reasons that do not make sense. When the Monkey King arrives at the door of the party and expects to be welcomed and announced, the guard at the door tells him that he cannot enter because he does not have shoes (14). Everyone at the party laughed at the Monkey King. In the story it said that he was “thoroughly embarrassed. He was so embarrassed, in fact, that he almost left without saying a word” (15). No amount of money would have gotten the Monkey King into the party just as money did not help Jin Wang when he entered his new school.

In the second strand, Jin Wang’s parents were working to save money and pay for college, undergraduate and graduate school. Wang’s mom worked in a cannery, and his dad sold wigs door to door. Yang makes a point to show how they sacrificed to obtain gainful employment. Jin Wang’s mom became a librarian, and his dad became an engineer (25). In Alexie’s *Diary*, Junior drew a picture of his parents if they had succeeded. Junior’s dad would have been a great musician, and his mom would have been a great librarian (12). Even though Jin Wang’s parents achieved success in their careers, Jin Wang still did not feel accepted.

Even though Chinese Americans have been in the United States for as many as seven generations, they are sometimes not recognized as Americans, no matter how much money they make. This refusal to accept Chinese American teens as Americans has disastrous effects according to Jeffery Paul Chan and his co-authors in their “Introduction to Chinese-American and Japanese-American Literatures” (197-198). In the article, the refusing and marginalizing of Chinese Americans causes them to feel “...sad, angry, swearing, wondering...” (197). For fifty years they have been feeling marginalized. Moving as a result of making more money changed Jin Wang’s life from living in an apartment in Chinatown and feeling accepted to living in a suburban home and feeling left out. Money had an effect on the story, but not the one most

people would expect. Just as society had been disappointing to some Asian Americans for the past fifty years, the money Jin Wang's parents made and spent on their new house caused Jin to be disappointed in his teachers and peers at his new school. Yang notes that money does not buy acceptance. This differs from the other two novels, where Junior and Esperanza yearn for financial stability and feel money would make a difference. As difficult as it is when a person is in poverty or experiencing unfair treatment, what helps is listening and/or helping someone else. What makes a difference is having an inner confidence that comes from self-love and kindness. In *Diary*, Junior becomes accepted when he cares about Penelope. Esperanza feels accepted when her friend tells her that she is Mango Street and when she and her sister have common opinions. Acceptance and friendship come after people feel heard and respected, and sometimes it takes time.

Although Yang's book differs from the other two novels in regards to helping the community, graphics, and money, his book is similar to *Diary* and *Mango* in the most important issues to a community, that they are treated with justice and with respect, accepted and appreciated for their unique qualities. The qualities that are similar are the protagonist's having a dual identity and the protagonist fighting stereotypes and racism. First of all, Yang includes three protagonists with dual identities, and he goes a step further by including magic to reveal these identities. Yang again goes outside the conventions to bring attention to the irony of the situation. The character feels deeply divided, and the story is divided. By the end, the bridge has been built, and the characters are connected just as the stories are connected. The resolution of the identity struggle is a major theme in *American Born Chinese*. Yang reveals the message about a person being valuable just as he is with the gods and the Monkey King. One time God tells the Monkey King that he is just as he should be (81). Second, the Monkey King reveals

Danny's true identity, too. Jin Wang wanted to be white so much that he appeared white with curly blonde hair and as the blonde Danny (214). When Yang was a child, he identified with the whites and wanted to fit in and be accepted. Yang's message is that an Asian American is as he should be. He should not want to be white. He is just as God intended him to be. His character is what needs to be examined. Being kind, compassionate, and forgiving are goals. Instead of selling his soul to be white, Jin Wang realizes that he was just as he was meant to be. The Monkey King got him to realize this since he experienced the same epiphany earlier in the story. Finally, Wei-Chin is actually the Monkey King's son. He does not change back into a monkey who accepts himself at the end. Instead, he looks similar to a misbehaving teen with money (229). Oftentimes, teens who do not have a strong family even join a gang for acceptance. This could represent a person so tired of the racism and stereotypes that he or she has given up the struggle to work within society. A person (or a monkey) can only take so much. Jin Wang's waiting in the diner for many nights may symbolize how long it will take for Asian Americans to forgive the society of the United States for all the mistreatment (226-228).

First of all, like Cisneros and Alexie, Yang confronts the stereotypes. In one strand of the story, Yang creates a stereotypical character Chin-Kee. Yang speaks about drawing a character that embodies all of the stereotypes about Chinese Americans. He has confidence that his readers will understand that representing a person this way is hurtful and harmful. About Chin-Kee, he said:

There is always the danger, of course, that by making a comic book about Cousin Chin-Kee I'm helping to perpetuate him, that readers – especially younger readers – will take his appearance in *American Born Chinese* at face value. I think it's a danger I can live with. In order for us to defeat our enemy, he must first be made visible. Besides, comic book readers are some of the smartest folks I've ever met. They'll figure it out. (Yang, "GeneYang.com")

Yang is making a point by including Chin-Kee, a character he drew in second-grade. Since second-grade, Yang has combined all of the stereotypes of Chinese Americans into one image, and that image is Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee's image is negative, and Yang decides that putting that image in his book is necessary because he wants to put his "enemy" out there and deal with it. Making stereotypes visible so that people can confront them is important. Combining all of the erroneous labels into one image is the first step. Once people can disprove each facet of the stereotype, it will cease to exist. Yang has Danny/Jin Wang take the top off of the stereotype in the end of the story, and it is the turning-point for Jin Wang. It is then that he realizes how damaging the stereotype, allowing others to see a person as a thing or as a non-human. As Aberjhani said in his poem, "Beneath the armor of skin/and/bone/and/mind/most of our colors are amazingly the same." When Yang uncovers the identity of his characters, it is similar to looking "beneath the armor of skin." Only with magic were the spirits of the characters connected, but the connections ended the book on a positive note.

People seem to have an armor to protect themselves from others, and many times people have two or more sides to their identity. In fact, many characters from *American Born Chinese* have dual identities. First, the white boy Danny hurts Chin-Kee, the Chinese student who embodies many of the stereotypes people have about Chinese Americans. Danny destroys the negative stereotypes when he knocks the head off of Chin-Kee in a fight. Yang makes the characters have two identities with magic. Magically, Chin-Kee becomes the Monkey King. In other words, the Monkey King came to Danny's house in the form of Chin-Kee to teach a lesson about stereotypes and kindness. Danny is a symbol for an Asian American wanting to be white, a type of internalized racism where an ethnic person begins to believe negative stereotypes about his or her ethnicity. Danny/Jin Wang mistreated Chin-Kee and tried to distance himself from his

cousin. Chin-Kee took all of Danny's abuse until Danny realized that he had sold his soul to be white just as the fortune-teller had predicted early in the story (29). Jin Wang had transformed from a happy boy to a teen wanting to be white and accepted at any cost. When he punched Chin-Kee's head off, he came to the realization that he had sold his soul (212-216).

After the Monkey King reveals himself, he magically has Danny turn into Jin Wang. Jin Wang wished his ethnicity away and became white. After Danny hits Chin-Kee, Chin-Kee turns into the Monkey King. Then, the Monkey King forces Danny to change. He asks Danny what his true identity is, and Danny turns back into Jin Wang. Jin Wang is really confused until the Monkey King explains that Wei-Chen, the Asian student that Jin Wang mistreated, is his son. Each character is not who he seems to be. Yang is making a point that a person inside may not be the person everyone assumes he is on the outside. Instead of having a person who has two sides, he brings magic into the story to show his points, showing that people should not be restricted to one ethnicity or another. It depends on how secure a person feels and how well one is accepted. This dual identity idea of an ethnic person being half Chinese and half American is impossible because if the person is not fully American or fully Chinese, for example, he does not fit in either place (Chan 197). When someone sees a person with more than two sides and cannot see that the person is fully Chinese and fully American, then there is a problem. There are endless possibilities that should be an internal decision, not an external one forced upon a person. In a way, Yang depicts his character Monkey King as Asian and American, containing both Buddhist and Christian ideals and details.

Yang addresses the issues and damaging cycle that he sees in his community. He sees that Asian Americans want to be white. Wanting to be white stems from internalized racism where the minority starts to feel inferior and starts to internalize racist attitudes. For example,

Suzy told Jin about a time someone called her a derogatory name. She said, “Today when Timmy called me a...a Chink, I realized...deep down inside...I kind of feel like that **all the time**” (187). Another example, Jin Wang tries being white. After experiencing many challenges, Jin Wang sees it is not any better being white. In fact, he feels worse because he “sold his soul” and mistreated others to be white. After his epiphany, Jin Wang begins to realize the value of his culture and the importance of a balance of pride and humility. All three stories are necessary for this conclusion. At the end, Yang wants other people to see the significance and longevity of the Asian American presence in the United States. He used Monkey King, a beloved story from his Chinese grandmother, to deliver that message. He wants readers to see that Asian Americans are Americans and Asians, and this urgent desire to make people aware of the struggles is the underlying theme of this noteworthy book.

By having three stories progress at the same time in each section, Yang changes the timeline of the book to be unusual. This is a quality the three ethnic *bildungsromane* include. All three authors use time as a tool to either show history or stop time. For example, at the end of *American Born Chinese*, Jin Wang waited for Chin-Kee/Monkey King’s son for many days, stopping time to emphasize Jin’s remorse (225-229).

Like the other two novels, *American Born Chinese* includes a few of the conventions from the Victorian *bildungsroman*: autobiographical details, epiphanies, and an ambiguous but hopeful ending. *American Born Chinese* is the most different from the other two novels in the format of the novel. Yang changes from prose to a graphic novel with three strands, possibly as a way to draw attention to the divided psyche of ethnic teens. Because *American Born Chinese* contains the urgent message to end stereotypes, has the protagonists build connections, has a

non-chronological timeline, and has difficulties ahead even after succeeding, this novel fits into the ethnic *bildungsroman* genre.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Cisneros, Alexie, and Yang combined many elements to form their ethnic *bildungsromane*. Each author borrowed qualities from the Victorian *bildungsroman* and *kunstlerroman* such as the ambiguous but hopeful endings, the financial strain, the autobiographical details, and the epiphanies. Especially notable are the ways the characters build bridges and make connections. They face challenges in society even after reaching their goals, so they try to help others in the community. Each epiphany is exciting as each protagonist grows and betters him or herself, and each protagonist is a small window into the mind of the author. The authors rejected elements such as the status quo in society or the way the government treats the minority groups. Each author has experienced mistreatment and wants to speak out. These qualities tie the three novels together and create a need for a new genre.

All three novels contain elements such as racism, stereotypes, non-chronological timelines, and dual identity, which are seldom the focus in Victorian *bildungsromane*. Beyond all of these elements, the protagonists had concern for the entire minority group and tried to help others. The protagonists and writers understand hegemony, negative self-image, and the damaging effects of marginalization. They developed coping mechanisms to fight against these negative feelings, and art as an escape was one of them. The art honored others and allowed them to speak for the groups. Most importantly, they were able to dream through the art, dreaming of houses, fitting in, acceptance, and even close relationships. Through their *bildungsromane* Cisneros, Alexie, and Yang are reaching out to people as they describe the growth and self-definition of minority subjects. They want a better future for all minorities in American society, but, in order to get that better future, they feel they must oppose the dominant culture. Success would end hegemony and help heal the soul wounds.

In this thesis, I found many common elements between these three novels, but even more study would be beneficial. Many of the common elements came from Victorian *bildungsromane*, but some were different and specific to ethnic *bildungsromane*. If I were to continue this research, I would have included other minority groups, other graphic novels, and novels representing a wider time frame of publishing. An additional commonality is that all three authors are publishing right now and continuing to speak out at college campuses and on the internet about minority groups. The problems of the current society really bother them right now. If I were to continue this research, I would choose a Mexican American novel and an African American novel published after 2000 to add into this study. If I had novels from the additional minority groups and that had more recent publication dates, trends would be more obvious. Another issue I would explore is the assumption that ethnic teens have a dual identity. Yang feels this assumption is a problem and causes stereotypes but it also a cause for celebration of differences. His focus on this aspect makes me want to find other books that explore both sides of dual identity.

Even though *The House on Mango Street* was published over fifty years ago, Mexican American issues are current, and the book is widely used. For these reasons, this book is relevant even though Sandra Cisneros is not in the public eye as much as the other two authors. The novel is easy to read with its short chapters and interesting characters. The imagery is memorable, and the pain from poverty is sharp. Cisneros succeeds when she tries to get her readers to understand challenges of racism and stereotypes. By using autobiographical details, Cisneros teaches readers about the importance of helping others (her aunt) and respecting ethnic names (Esperanza in “My Name”) and even what groups are called (Hispanic vs. Latino). The image of bums in the attic and shame she felt about her home stand out as poignant images that readers will not soon forget.

Cisneros felt disappointed by the adults in the community and the adults in school. Mexican Americans deserve better.

In the second novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, the protagonist Junior struggles with and speaks out against similar issues and disappointments. Junior suffers with so much poverty that he has to skip meals. Beyond physical suffering is the mental suffering as he watches his father who is depressed and drinking heavily. Junior notices the lack of hope in his family and community; he wants to escape so that he can survive. Leaving is not easy, however, since the people in his community feel betrayed that he left. Only when his grandmother passes away do the members of the community rally behind him again. Junior has challenges outside his reservation at Reardan High as well. When Junior attends an all-white school, he confronts stereotypes and racism but also builds a bridge between the two communities. The humor and illustrations lighten the mood of the story; as a result, Alexie's method of reaching out to others succeeds. He, too, is disappointed with adults in his family and his community, but he sees the government as the main problem. Yes, the people are stuck in poverty on the reservation, and he sees the policies from the government to blame. The hopeful ending focuses on healing rather than blame, finishing on a positive note.

The most interesting novel of the three is *American Born Chinese*, which contains memorable images about ethnic teens as well. The images of Chin-Kee in his Chinese clothes with his buck teeth prove how damaging stereotypes can be. His exaggerated mispronunciations and extreme love for America help readers realize that the stereotypes are almost comical in how incorrectly they misrepresent the Chinese people. Yang's memories from third grade and his feelings of guilt from grade school give the reader a realistic, personal, and powerful look into his life. The main plot of his book is about how Jin Yang mistreats Wei-Chen. Jin Yang learns

how to treat others and that things are not always what they seem from a mythical figure Monkey King. This special story he loved but left in childhood shows how a young person struggling to fit in changed into an adult who is proud of his history and feels valuable just as he is. His website and book together allow the reader to understand the challenges of ethnic teens in ethnic *bildungsromane*. Yang points to the way society treats ethnic teens as the main problem. Even though his book seems simple and fun, almost like a comic book, his points are carefully crafted in a complex, three-prong attack at the reader's conscience. The three prongs coming together at the end reiterate connections that are necessary in the nation.

The three novels and the three protagonists have similar challenges and successes. These three teens, Esperanza, Jin Wang, and Junior, at some point want to be white. They notice that their ethnicity makes them different when they want to fit in and be the same. Instead of fitting in, the teens feel marginalized at school. Teachers mistreated all three of them. School is a microcosm of society, and the people in power represent the white society. The ethnic teens represent their communities, trying to survive and thrive against many odds such as poverty and racism and fallacious assumptions, even though these problems are out of their control. The first two novels contain protagonists who escape and make a difference through art. Esperanza has her writing, and Junior draws pictures. In the third novel, Yang strikes out at society using his own art. All three novels have hopeful ending that focus on minority groups defining themselves and healing soul wounds. After reading the three novels, the reader feels hope for the teens and for the respective groups. The urgent message to connect, to expand the vision of what a "typical" American is, and to cope by providing hope is ready to be discussed. This is the first step toward change that will improve life for all and make each culture richer.

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