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**MAKING LITERATURE MEANINGFUL: EXPLORING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN REALISTIC
YOUNG ADULT MULTICULTURAL FICTION**

by

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**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for the
degree of Master of Education**

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the need to connect students to literature that is meaningful to their culture and experience. Assuming that literature has the power to make students aware of different cultural values and experiences, this thesis presents arguments for transforming the Secondary School English curriculum so that it is more reflective of society's growing ethnic diversity. To assist parents and educators in the selection of multicultural literature, this study provides a model of analysis for evaluating the cultural content of young adult multicultural fiction books. The thematic content analysis of the nine young adult multicultural books selected for this study examines how the theme of cultural identity is explored in each novel. Steps in the analysis include 1. Describing the books' thematic content, and 2. Evaluating the books' meaningfulness in relation to the young adolescent reader. The in-depth analysis of the nine books included in this study identified two major approaches to cultural identity as well as nine common multicultural issues that offer insight into the kinds of issues and concerns that are treated in young adult multicultural fiction.

The potential of multicultural fiction for engaging students in a personal exploration of literature is that it provides them with a broader reflection of society and may help them to understand such marginalized issues as race, class, and gender. This study's recommendations for further research include developing new strategies for using multicultural literature in the classroom and discovering new methods of textual response that encourage students to see relationships between literature and their own lives.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The books that reach children should authentically depict and interpret their lives and their history, build self-respect and encourage the development of positive values, make children aware of their strength and leave them with a sense of hope and direction.
(Greenfield, 1985, p.21)

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to have had positive reading experiences know that to open a book is to open oneself up to life and its many possibilities. Between the crisp and new or well-worn pages there are new people to meet and different places to go. But what if every book you were asked to read was inhabited by characters who seemed strange and unfamiliar, and whose experience of life was totally unconnected from your own? What would it be like to be forever on the outside looking in on a culture and an identity that you didn't share? Unfortunately, this latter situation is one that is faced by thousands of students across this country. Many literature curricula fail to allow readers "to make powerful connections to works that draw on what they already know and to validate the importance of that knowledge" (Romero & Zancanella, 1990, p. 27). When nonmainstream students are not exposed to texts that reflect their experience they may come to feel that their cultural heritage is either non-existent or not important. If as educators we want to use literature and the act of reading as a means for liberating thinking and for connecting to diverse groups of students, then it is necessary for us to provide students with literary experiences that are culturally meaningful.

Although the idea of connecting students to multicultural literature may be highly desirable to many educators, a limited availability of quality titles and a lack of awareness of what constitutes authentic multicultural literature may stand in the way of well-meaning teachers. The lack of multicultural content in many English curricula is due, in part, to the lack of multicultural titles in large publishing houses. Although the number of published non-white authors has increased substantially over the last 25 years, the percentage of books depicting non-majority experience written and illustrated by people from that experience is no cause for celebration; of the 5000 children's books published in North America in 1990, about one percent were written by African American authors. The statistics are significantly lower for

books written by other members of ethnic groups and persons of color. Clearly, for students and educators to increase their awareness of the reality of our pluralistic culture, and of the fact that books do provide an essential experience for understanding multicultural perspectives, more attention needs to be paid to the kinds of books that find their way into school libraries and classrooms.

This research intends to provide parents and educators with an analytical model for selecting multicultural books for the home and classroom. The pedagogical aspect of this research considers the possibilities of knowing and being known in a literary context. My exploration of the value of multicultural literature for nonmainstream students is intimately concerned with the primary importance of meaning-making in human experiencing.

Because I am interested in the opportunities provided by literature for students to explore issues critical to their lives, thematic content analysis is a useful method for describing the potentialities of a particular text. This form of analysis is concerned with two types of understanding: 1) How the theme of cultural identity is explored in each of the novels, and 2) What social insights can be gained by the reader from each literary transaction. My study's focus on the potential of each novel to engage the reader informs the need for a method of analysis that effectively describes the nature of the lived through evocation of the literary work (Rosenblatt, 1978). Thematic content analysis was chosen for this study because of its descriptive power, its ability to clarify the work as evoked, to record the characters encountered or empathized with, and to hold onto the special quality and texture of the reading experience.

Terminology

When dealing with such sensitive issues as race and ethnicity no term is wholly satisfactory for describing a particular group of people. "Multicultural" has come into popular usage among educators and literary critics alike, but it is a word that has various connotations to different people and different organizations. I have chosen to adopt the Cooperative Children's Book Centre (CCBC) definition of multicultural, which uses the word to refer to people of color, including African-Americans, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Hispanics. The terms that I use to describe dominant and subdominant cultural groups are problematic for both their inaccuracy and their cultural sensitivity. "Mainstream" and

“nonmainstream” are not only vague, but the former terms suggest something that is normal and widely accepted while the latter term suggests something abnormal and marginal. Although it is not my intention to use misleading descriptors, my research into multicultural studies shows these terms to be preferable to “minority” and “majority”. Given the ongoing demographic shift in North American society these terms are quickly becoming numerically incorrect, and are further burdened with honorific and pejorative connotations. Any attempt to describe dominating and dominated groups, however, is unlikely to be satisfactory to every reader. For this discussion I will use “mainstream” reader and “majority” culture to refer to the white Euroamerican group; “nonmainstream” will be more or less synonymous with multicultural, and will generally refer to people of color. Although I recognize that the language surrounding multicultural issues will continue to evolve over time I have selected descriptors currently preferred by the people to whom the descriptor refers.

I wish to point out that although I have chosen to use the terms African-American, Asian-American, and Native American to describe the cultural categories used in this study, I do not wish to exclude the Canadian perspective or to make the claim that the experience of a nonmainstream Canadian is identical to that of a nonmainstream American. I have chosen to use the aforementioned descriptors because they are the ones most commonly used in the publishing industry. Although there are many differences between publishing houses in Canada and publishing houses in the United States, both countries have experienced a deficiency in multicultural publishing.

The term cultural identity also requires clarification as the concept of identity cuts across almost all academic boundaries and is interpreted and understood differently by individuals and groups. My use of the term may be defined as the academic metaphor for the self-in-context (Fitzgerald, 1993). According to this definition culture is communicative knowledge that, through the process of identity, works to help individuals cope in specific cultural and social contexts. The analytic framework of this study views identity as a bridging concept that enables readers to strengthen their understanding of human culture and communication.

Goals of the Research

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to analyze and describe the thematic content of young adult, multicultural fiction books that focus on the development of cultural identity; second, to provide a method of textual analysis that focuses on the social insights gained from literature and on its ability to invite students into more meaningful transactions with texts. Given that the time for a student-centered approach to literature is long overdue, there is a need for studies that focus on demonstrating the vital connections between literature and issues critical to students' lives (Short, 1996). Thematic content analysis proposes to fill this need by providing contextually based insights that are socially relevant and by demonstrating the use of literature as a basis for student growth and development. My analysis of how the theme of cultural identity is expressed in nine young adult, multicultural fiction novels is intended to help educators open the door to critical thinking about the kinds of literary experiences that are meaningful to students' lives.

In many respects this research is reform-driven in that it is intended to address the unequal power relationships that exist in curricula; specifically, my inquiry is directed at the classroom use of texts that offer only one majority group's experiences or viewpoints. One of the main perspectives that characterize my work is the conception of curriculum as a cultural force that influences interactions and interpretations among teachers, students, and texts.

Another goal of this research is to raise possibilities for resolving inequities in the English curriculum. In order to change learning situations that devalue students' cultural perspective and push them to the margins of educational practice, reform is essential. In accordance with Fay's (1987) outline of a critical social science, "I am committed to a practice that will simultaneously explain the social world, critique it, and empower its audience to overthrow it" (p. 23).

What all of these goals have in common is a preoccupation with the politics of knowing and being known. The kind of reform that this research is designed to inspire is the reformulation of what constitutes legitimate knowledge in English classrooms. If education is to fulfil its commitment to cultural pluralism and the creation of democratic classrooms, it is necessary to recognize the interests and experiences of people who are not part of mainstream culture. My exploration of literature as the basis for pedagogy is

intended to consider the possibilities of knowing and finding out about the self and others in the context of education.

Importance of the Study

Books are important for their transformative power: they help us to imagine beyond the boundaries of our own existence and to catch a glimpse of a reality different from our own. Literature improves our ability to live as citizens of the world because it prevents us from being locked into one way of seeing. A good book can help to break down the barriers that separate us, not by providing shining role models or literal recipes, but by allowing us to step into the lives of people from different cultures in all of their complexity, and to weave the fabric of those lives into our own.

The content of multicultural literature has only recently begun to receive critical attention, and thus far most of the research done in the area of multicultural fiction consists of literary criticism, genre identification, and bibliographies of multicultural titles (Short, 1995). This study will contribute to the existing knowledge of multicultural fiction by going beyond formalist literary criticism to place more emphasis on issues of content. It is my goal that reflection upon the insights into cultural content within this study can create a missing dimension in children's and young adult's book reviewing, which too often contains "only enthusiastic descriptions of new books" (Lindren, viii, 1991). In recent years, however, the evaluation of books for young people has assumed new forms of criticism. It has been argued by Taxel (1986) that the traditional evaluation and criticism of children's literature must be accompanied by criticism that focuses on the sociohistorical and cultural dimensions of that literature. Implicit in the justification for breaking new critical ground is a set of assumptions about children's literature, its social functions, and its impact on young readers (Taxel, 1986). The most important assumption is that what children read matters. A belief in the power of literature to change the world has convinced numerous critics (including myself) that literary analysis must not be confined to an evaluation of the aesthetic values and properties of a work. Given the potential impact of books on children's growing awareness and values, critics have a responsibility to address what Myers (1991) calls "cultural substance": the transmittal of values through culture and the cultural forces that influence our actions and lives. This kind of evaluation is essential for

adults and educators who wish to strengthen their commitment to the search for authentic multicultural literature rather than merely to accumulate ever-growing lists of books labeled by one source or another as "multicultural". Insight and experience about races and cultures other than one's own can be discovered by anyone who is willing to make the effort to truly listen to the voices that speak outside of one's personal experience. The more time that one spends with these voices the more one begins to be able to distinguish authenticity of cultural substance from that which is superficially "multicultural" (Hornig & Kruse, 1991).

The analytic framework used to examine the books in this study is designed to demonstrate the use of literature as the basis for pedagogy by providing contextually based insights into the theme of cultural identity. A thematic content analysis of multicultural trade books is essential for uncovering themes and ideas that invite nonmainstream students to connect with literature that is meaningful to their culture and experience. Because realistic multicultural titles are under-represented in English curricula, these books are not readily available and must be sought out by educators. The importance of this study will be to examine the opportunities provided by literature for students to engage in a personal exploration of cultural identity, and ultimately to open the door to more democratic classrooms.

Delimitations

There are three delimitations to my research. First, all of the texts used in this study are written in English. Translated books were not used because of the difficulty involved in establishing an analytic framework that is applicable to texts created from a different cultural and literary aesthetic. Similarly, my reading of the texts will unquestionably be shaped by my own culture, values, experiences, and the critical preoccupation that I bring to my analysis. I point out that although this study proposes to reveal the potentialities of multicultural texts for young adult readers, I embrace the idea that different aesthetic transactions with the same texts may produce different interpretations, depending on the nature, state of mind, or past experience of the reader. In assuming this kind of position I make the claim that for every text there are multiple meanings. Rather than attempting to pursue one correct reading of a literary work, I am interested in reading as an opportunity to explore and create. To clarify the goals of my interpretive framework I adopted Wolcott's (1990) use of the term *understanding* which is less concerned with proving

something to be true, and more concerned with making the literary experience intelligible by applying particular concepts and categories.

Another limitation of this study is the selection of titles from the genre of realistic fiction. Because this research is concerned with literature as the basis for pedagogy, I have chosen to examine works from a genre that has been highly rated by adolescents in reader response research (Johnson & Smith, 1993). It must be pointed out, however, that realistic fiction does not represent the vast collection of diverse works that exist in each culture. Many nonmainstream authors choose other literary genres to express their cultural voice. Similarly, although this study is intended to provide insight into cultural identity, it is not intended to represent the experience of a particular culture as a whole. Any discussion of human experience must recognize the infinite variations that exist within each cultural group.

To clarify the scope of this study I must point out that my research is not reader response based. I am not looking at how individual students transact with a given text. This thesis makes several assumptions about the power of literature to influence students' ideas and attitudes, and focuses on the potential richness of multicultural content in young adult fiction. Although this research has many implications for exploring the ways in which students transact with multicultural texts, it will require an interested and competent teacher to pursue these opportunities for exploration in a classroom setting.

In terms of this study's method of evaluation, I made the distinction between the traditional evaluation and criticism of aesthetic values of young adult literature and criticism that focuses on the sociohistorical and cultural dimensions of that literature. These two forms of criticism need not conflict with one another; both require the attention of the responsible critic. However, the focus of this discussion will be on the cultural content of the books included in this study rather than on those elements that are most strictly aesthetic.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter Two will be a review of the literature written in the form of a persuasive essay. It will provide the background to this study and will address the critical issues surrounding children's literature from which my study extends. I will begin my analysis in Chapter Three through close readings of the nine

young adult multicultural books selected for this study. The model of analysis described in Chapter Three will be applied to the chosen books, and I will focus on the quality of the social insights gained in each novel. From this I will explore the theme of cultural identity and discuss how this theme is treated in each of the nine novels. I expect to identify the specific ways in which the texts' thematic content invites the reader into a meaningful exploration of cultural identity. In Chapter Four I will summarize my findings, outline conclusions, and make recommendations. Throughout this discussion I will maintain a focus on the power of literature to engage students' interest and emotions.

CHAPTER TWO

An Advocacy for Reform in the English Curriculum

Irrelevant Learning and Nonmainstream Students

The issue of “relevance” and its role in creating an inclusive classroom has grown increasingly important in recent years, especially to teachers of language and literature. Louise Rosenblatt’s (1976) classic *Literature as Exploration* effectively described the negative effects that irrelevant selections have on the positive reading experiences of nonmainstream students. Rosenblatt’s book made a persuasive argument for reform in the English curriculum. Providing a striking example of learning without meaningful context Rosenblatt stated that: “During a reorganisation of education on the Indian [sic] reservations some years ago, it was discovered that in some classes the Indian boys and girls were being required to read Restoration comedies” (p.16). Given the non-existent relationship between a First Nations child’s experience of the world and restoration comedies it is not surprising that the students in the above example showed signs of extreme boredom: fidgeting with school supplies, staring out the window, and talking boisterously to one another. The above scenario is not difficult to imagine because the same behaviour can be observed in countless classrooms today. Although one may raise the objection that Rosenblatt first made her argument in 1976, recent studies show that a large percentage of the English curriculum remains devoted to majority writers (Applebee, 1989; Beach & Marshall, 1991). Given the desirability of creating cross-cultural awareness in a pluralistic society, the literature curriculum needs to embrace a variety of cultural experiences. Beach and Marshall (1991) found that requiring African American students to read mainstream literature that excludes their cultural perspective might cause them to see an enormous gap between the school culture and their home culture. Nonmainstream students often have difficulty identifying with the cultural viewpoints of the majority culture when they are experiencing a significantly different cultural world (Beech & Marshall, 1991).

Any inquiry into what constitutes relevant reading material for a particular group of students requires an understanding of the relationship between language and culture. H. Rapp Brown (1969), in his autobiographical work *Die, Nigger, Die!*, describes his education:

If you leave school hating yourself, then it doesn't matter how much you know...I was in constant conflict with my teachers in high school. I would interpret the thing one way and they would say it's wrong...The street is where young bloods get their education. I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading Dick and Jane (p. 21).

Brown tells us that the language of schooling is meaningless to his life, is harmful to that life, and is an obstacle to receiving a genuine education. Brown's experience of school was detrimental to his self-esteem because it devalued what he considered to be legitimate knowledge. The conflict he encountered over his interpretation of a literary work reveals a kind of institutionalised cultural hegemony that recognises only one way of understanding human experience. The world that Brown encountered at school was a world that did not recognise the language he had learned. Brown did not connect with the literature he was required to read because the words on the page did not resonate with any of the needs, emotions, or relationships in his own experience.

Frantz Fanon (1967), in *Black Skins, White Masks*, similarly describes the relationship between language and power: "To discard one's language is to discard one's way of thinking and to discard one's culture. A man who has a language also possesses the world expressed and implied by that language... To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (pp. 16, 38). In Fanon's view, when a man decides to abandon his language he is at the same time making a decision to reject the culture that is inseparable from that language.

Literature, employing language as one of its components, offers readers an image of the world, a culture (Cook, 1985). This image does not only portray the world of readers, but connects the reader to other possible worlds. This juxtaposition of the reader and culture makes a case for the social function of literature, the ability of the literary work to bring the reader to a clearer understanding of him/her self and the world in which he/she lives. The individual who is unable to make sense of the words on the page,

however, is deprived of this kind of consciousness raising experience: "The book for that person is a universal blank" (Cook, p. 211).

In order to exploit literature's potential to engage students' interest and enlarge their knowledge of themselves and others, educators need to expose students to texts that appeal to their personal experiences. Literature that does not appeal to readers' primal perceptions is limited in its ability to provide a meaningful reading experience. Dorsey (1977) puts it in this way:

When the reader's experience and perceptions do not correspond with those of the text, "noise" is immediate and conscious...Only literature can objectify one's own value system from the communal. Only by defining cultural difference can one consciously identify one's own culture in oneself (pp. 17-18).

In Dorsey's vision, literature forces us to know who we are by knowing the "other" of the literature we experience. If the gap between the reader's world and the other world of literature is too great, "noise" is the inevitable result. This is the kind of "noise" that drowns out the reader's home world and language. If literature allows readers nothing of their culture and experience, then they may not be able to hear the voices that speak to readers through the works they read. Although some "noise" allows readers to expand their understanding of the world, too much "noise" makes this understanding more difficult to achieve. In order to solve the problem of interference during the act of reading, educators need to learn as much about a student's home language as possible, and give that language a place in the classroom equal to that of other languages. Equally essential is educators' willingness to acknowledge the experiences that students bring to the classroom, and to bring their understanding of those experiences to their selection of literature. Students should be exposed to works that validate their language and culture, and that attempt to express them in an intelligible and aesthetic form (Cook, 1985). This idea is not to suggest, however, that nonmainstream students do not learn from reading literature that is unfamiliar to them. All students, regardless of their cultural perspective, benefit from being exposed to a mixture of texts that allow them to encounter both self and other in the mirror of fiction. Both kinds of encounters provide students with meaningful learning experiences.

For teachers to respond effectively to the reading needs of their nonmainstream students they need to act on Dewey's (1963) well-known principle that the education of children should take into account their sociocultural backgrounds and begin with the experience that they bring with them to the classroom. The influence of this maxim on efforts to create meaningful reading experiences for students points to a new concept of literacy. Freire (1987) recognises the importance of viewing literacy as more than the treatment of letters and words in a purely mechanical domain. He argues that we need to go beyond this rigid comprehension of literacy and begin to view it as "the relationship of learners to the world, mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel" (p. viii). If we are to embrace this wider understanding of what it means to be literate then we can no longer accept forms of learning that devalue students' cultures and experiences.

Literature as Exploration

Given the potential benefits of using multicultural literature in the classroom, the challenge to educators is to create opportunities for students to encounter literature that recognises their interests and culture. According to Rosenblatt (1976) the exchange between reader and text is a process yielding knowledge. She describes the process of transaction as encouraging the student to engage in a "lived through experience of the literary work" (p. 25). This approach views the act of reading as an interactional process between the story and the reader. The student brings his or her own thoughts, feelings, and culture to every book he or she reads. The words on the printed page are mere ink blots until the reader transforms them into meaningful symbols (Rosenblatt, 1976). Benton (1992) describes literary transactions as an "imaginative dialogue" between author, narrator, other characters, and the reader. "Books are embalmed voices. The reader's job is to disinter them and breathe life into them" (p. 17). During the act of reading the reader is moving between two worlds: the new world encountered in the text, and the primary world of past experiences. According to both Benton and Rosenblatt the literary text invites and enables the reader to step into the lives of other human beings. Through literature students acquire not so much additional information as additional experience. Literature provides a living through, not simply knowledge about.

In terms of the text's specific contribution to the meaning-making process, Rosenblatt asserts that

the literary work “embodies verbal stimuli toward a special kind of intense and ordered experience-- sensuous, intellectual, emotional, out of which social insights may arise” (Rosenblatt, 1976, pp.31-32). The literary work is able to convey these kinds of insights more powerfully than other modes of discourse, because the author patterns thoughts and ideas in a more creative form that enables the reader to share this vision (p. 34). Extolling the potential of literature to increase readers’ understandings of the world, Rosenblatt argues that every personal exploration of a text is unique in its ability to engage the inner life and thought of the reader.

Given the opportunities provided by literature we cannot overlook the potential of books to increase students’ understanding of the people and events in the world around them. As Meek (1991) points out, language is not the only thing that students learn from books; the stories themselves, the ideas they contain, are also charged with learning potential. Once readers have grasped the structure of stories they are able to look at, and perhaps learn from, characters and situations that they may never encounter in real life. As a result of his or her engagement with a particular story the reader is able to ask: what would I do if I were in that person’s place? Is there a part of me that understands what he or she is feeling? These kinds of questions send the reader on two kinds of explorations, of the value system that prevails in the world and the one revealed in the text, and of the way narrative deals with these things. Readers have to confront the multifaceted nature of human experience as it exists in life and in stories. In a learning situation both life and text are important sources of information about the complex ways in which human beings interact with one another.

All of these findings have profound pedagogical implications. Teachers of literature need to make their practice reflect an understanding that if students aren’t engaged by literature they will not read. Yet if they can discover in literature ideas and experiences relevant to their own lives their insights have the potential to amaze. The challenge to educators is to select literature that they may not identify with, but that their nonmainstream students will. It is relatively easy for mainstream teachers to select literature for mainstream students because they can make certain assumptions about students’ interests and previous experiences. More difficult for teachers to acquire is the ability to encourage students to engage in a

personal exploration of literature, and not necessarily in what the teacher thinks is great literature. As Meek (1991) insightfully points out "What texts teach is a process of discovery for readers, not a programme of instruction for teachers" (p. 31).

Personal transaction with the text allows students to develop their own sense of curiosity about human relationships and events. As educators we are responsible for exposing students to literary experiences that offer various opportunities for them to use their imagination and to explore to make meaning. When all that we offer students is a traditional, highly canonised body of works we send students the message that their ideas and experiences are not valued, and that we do not place great importance on their ability to explore the literature and to derive their own meaning from it (Oliver, 1994).

Multicultural Literature and the Development of Self Esteem

Bringing multicultural literature into the classroom provides students with the opportunity to engage in a personal exploration of people and situations, which may be unfamiliar to them. For minority students exposure to multicultural literature can become a vehicle for self-respect. The opportunity to see people like themselves represented in high quality books helps students who represent nonmainstream cultures validate their own experience and increase a sense of self worth that comes from knowing "that authors of substance and value come from their culture" (Romero & Zancanella, 1990, p.27).

If we see literature as a mirror that reflects human life, then we can regard multicultural literature as an opportunity for all children to see themselves reflected as part of humanity. Multicultural literature can provide children of color with models of learning positive messages about themselves and people like them. Henderson (1991) recognises the building of self-esteem as a developmental process during which the individual's self esteem undergoes significant change. Our understanding of who we are undergoes many transformations as we gradually evolve into the person we are to become.

In Henderson's developmental framework of self-esteem the onset of adolescence is a crucial stage in students' understanding of their identity and self worth. They are likely to experience many changes in their feelings about themselves and those around them. Adolescence is often a period when peer pressure is so intense that children of different racial/ethnic backgrounds who "grew up together, even in similar

socio-economic groups, begin to drift away from each other, especially in social situations” (p. 24).

Although adolescence is understood to be a particularly difficult and sometimes painful stage of life for many people, Henderson asserts that this developmental period marks a juncture where children of color are more vulnerable than others. It is important for parents and educators to recognise this fact so that they may begin to provide developmentally appropriate experiences and support.

According to Henderson, multicultural literature can be used as a valuable means of support and enlightenment for the nonmainstream child or adolescent. Literature affords children the opportunity to explore the struggles, myths, movement, beauty, rituals, religion, and holidays of their own cultural group and those of others. These kinds of literary experiences help children to develop social sensitivity to the needs of others and to realise that people have similarities as well as differences (Norton, 1990). By addressing the issues and conflicts that affect nonmainstream children, multicultural literature can bring these students in from the outside, and can lead them to explore issues that may help them with similar situations in their own lives. Research on reader response reveals that although students may be hesitant to talk about personal experiences in the larger class, they identify with and will discuss in small groups fictional characters who personify similar conflicts and situations (Johnson & Smith, 1993).

Banks (1989) uses the term “mainstreamcentric” to describe a curriculum that offers only mainstream perspective and experience. In Bank’s view this kind of education has a negative impact on the self-esteem of both mainstream and nonmainstream students because it contributes to the perpetuation of racism and ethnocentrism in schools and in society at large. A mainstreamcentric curriculum is detrimental to mainstream students because:

It reinforces their false sense of superiority, gives them a misleading conception of their relationship with other racial and ethnic groups, and denies them the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge, perspective, and frames of references that can be gained from studying and experiencing other cultures and groups (pp. 189-90).

When people view their culture from the perspective of another, they are able to understand their own culture more fully, and to see how it is unique and distinct from others as well as how it interrelates to and

intersects with other cultures. When we are able to expand our worldview to include other perspectives we are more likely to be able to find meaning outside of our small world. However, in order to break free from the confines of a mainstreamcentric curriculum, it is necessary to achieve a balance of cultural viewpoints and experiences. Multicultural literature and multicultural education across subject areas, throughout the school year, and at home are critical to achieving a balanced curriculum. Banks believes that the lack of this kind of approach damages the self-esteem of children of color by marginalizing their experiences and their cultures.

Multicultural Literature: A Call for Cultural Pluralism

The tremendous power of literature is manifested in the countless investigations of the nature of language and literacy, and in heated debates over the censorship of reading materials. People in positions of authority over others have historically understood, and often feared, the potential of the word to influence the minds of people under their power (Simms, 1986). Paulo Freire argues that literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people. The idea of multiple literacies suggests that other voices need to be heard and not be marginalized by a single view of a correct language as schooled literacy (Cook-Gumprez, 1993). This modern understanding of language recognises that literacy is a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic instrument, one creating and maintaining power as well as enabling resistance.

In recent years a large amount of research has investigated the relations between the ways knowledge is selected, structured, and distributed by schools, and the principles of social and economic control in a society. Findings from this research have established that "social power is culturally represented, and that knowledge and culture are essential moments in the process of social domination" (Wexler, 1982, p.279). What this means in terms of school knowledge is that what educational institutions transmit to students is a highly selective representation of the totality of available knowledge and not simply objective sets of facts and information as has been assumed by previous research (Apple, 1979a; Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu, 1971a, 1971b). In this way schools help to define certain groups' knowledge as legitimate while other knowledge is considered inappropriate as school knowledge (Apple, 1979). Those groups or

social classes that have had the privilege of being able to define *their* knowledge as the legitimate knowledge have been the dominant groups in society, while those unable to do so have tended to lack power and pre-eminence in society (Taxel, 1981). This relationship between culture and power is obvious when one recognises that the well-documented stereotyping, distortion, and outright elimination of women, people of color, and other racial and ethnic groups in curricular materials is both a result and a cause of the relative powerlessness of these groups in the larger society.

Suzuki (1984) recognises cultural pluralism as a necessary antidote to the influence of cultural hegemony that exists in many schools. For schools to respond effectively to the educational needs of ethnic and racial minorities, Suzuki argues that a transformation of the existing curriculum is required. In order for education to be meaningful for nonmainstream students, the knowledge that is disseminated by schools needs to represent the social and cultural interests of all of the people in society.

Evaluating the Sociohistorical and Cultural Content of Children's and Young Adult Literature

The challenge to make curricular materials reflect a culturally diverse society requires educators to develop theoretical constructs appropriate for the study of children's and young adult literature. This body of writing is particularly worthy of analysis according to Kelly (1970) because authors have long used the literary arts to extol the values, principles, and assumptions that unconsciously or not help to socialise children into specific worldviews. Thus, children's literature becomes an important symbolic form through which a society transmits central elements of its culture to the young.

The assumption that literature for children has a social and moral function informs the need for a method of literary analysis that takes the sociohistorical and cultural dimensions of that literature into account. Discussions about the socio-cultural and political aspects of literature have become part of a broader critique of society that among other things attempts to explain how and why ideologies such as racism and sexism are so absorbed in consciousness as to become part of our worldview. Research in the sociology of school knowledge suggests that literature affects not only children's self images, but also their developing values, attitudes, and beliefs. Organisations such as the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1976) claim that children's books are deeply implicated in the transmission and perpetuation of

racism and sexism and insist that literary analysis must not be limited to a consideration of the aesthetic values and properties of a work. In their view the negative impact of racist and sexist ideologies on society obligates the critic to attend to the socio-political ideologies present in literature as well as to literary values.

Despite the growing interest in the cultural content of children's literature, much of the previous research in this area has lacked a clear theoretical framework. A large body of work on children's literature has been devoted to creating a conceptual tool capable of responding to teachers' and librarians' demands for books "suitable to the nurture of successive generations of American children" (Kelly, 1973, p. 94). However, the work of Kelly (1970) and Simms (1982) has broken new ground in establishing a theoretical framework that questions the traditional notion that literature, and art in general, exists for its own sake and should not be subjected to any criteria except purely literary ones. Advocates of this position include Townsend (1969), who argues that "in writing there is no substitute for the creative imagination, and in criticism there is no criterion except literary merit" (p. 40). On the value of assessing a book in terms of its racial attitudes Townsend insists that this kind of social criticism is a dangerous step towards "literature as propaganda" (p. 40). Townsend thus makes a clear separation between a work's literary values and certain of its social, historical, or cultural values. However, many new critics challenge Townsend's distinction, arguing that aesthetic properties cannot be separated from moral and sociocultural values. Kelly's (1984) analysis of attempts to create "a pure or rigorous critical (i.e. literary) approach to children's literature" led him to conclude that such attempts were unsuccessful. According to Kelly these efforts fail because the basic distinction between moral and literary values cannot be upheld. Kelly thus concludes that: "The quest for a purely literary approach to the problem of selecting the best books for children is thus doomed from the start. So-called literary approaches are specific cultural allegiances wrapped in the mantle of art and labelled handle with reverence" (p. 3).

Concurring with Kelly's sentiments, MacCan and Woodward (1972) argue that "because language is indissolubly connected with history, institutions, moral questions, and personal strategies, meaning and style can never be neatly separated in works of realistic fiction" (p. 5). In their view this assertion creates a need for an insider's perspective in children's books, with insider referring to the author's ability to write

from a viewpoint that is from the inside of a particular culture rather than from the outside. Books created from such a vantage point are considered to be “aesthetically effective, as well as socially and psychologically authentic” (p. 6). MacCann and Woodward end their discussion with the point that in all kinds of fiction, aesthetic and sociological criteria are rarely in conflict.

Thompson and Woodward (1972) express a similar concern for the authenticity of a book’s cultural voice. They argue that stereotypes are created when characters are generated from assumptions about people of color rather than from the demands of narrative. The result is literature of poor quality which fosters “simplistic notions about human nature and reduce(s) the complexity of personality to a formula” (p. 21). Although Thompson and Woodward advocate the need for authentic literary characterisations they agree that books should not be judged solely on the basis of their racial attitudes and criticise those who “write for the sole purpose of promoting certain racial attitudes” (p. 6). They assert that “the literature that will truly give black children a sense of identity will not be literature-as-morality nor literature-as-propaganda, but literature as human experience” (p. 22). The only way an author can achieve the perspective necessary for the creation of literature that is both culturally authentic and aesthetically effective is immersion in the history and culture of the people being written about.

The arguments of Kelly, MacCann and Woodward, Thompson and Woodward, and Simms reveal that criticisms centring on cultural authenticity reflect a political concern about who controls the way nonmainstream cultures are represented in books for children. An important concern for these scholars is whether, when those outside the cultures are the creators and publishers of those books, they seek to shape and control nonmainstream culture by placing themselves in a position of power to decide its value. Confirming the social responsibility of authors, Milton Metzler (1989) quotes E.B. White who points out: “Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life” (p. 156).

Simms (1993) does not make the claim that an author from one cultural group cannot write quality literature about another group, but she does point out, however, that literature created from an outsider’s perspective is not likely to be claimed by the people of the cultural group being written about as “their literature” (p. 46). In her advice to educators who wish to bring multicultural literature into their classroom,

Simms recommends reading the literature of insiders to help teachers become aware of “recurring themes, topics, values, attitudes, language features, social mores - those elements that characterise the body of literature the group claims as its own” (p. 46). Reading widely will familiarise educators with the variety and diversity that exists within a particular culture. However, Simms is careful to point out that it is important for readers to understand that no one book can represent the experience of an entire cultural group.

Educational concerns about cultural authenticity are related to the goals multicultural literature is expected to achieve. All literature is capable of offering insights into human experience, but multicultural literature also takes on the socio-political aims of the multicultural education movement of which it is a part. Within that framework multicultural literature becomes a means for socialisation and change. Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard (1991), a noted children’s book author, expresses it this way:

We must also aim for that authentic body of literature for children which can lead us toward our goals: self-esteem for those previously not reflected in the mirror, and important enlightenment for those who, for too long, have only seen themselves in that mirror; all leading toward the celebration of living in the multicultural society (pp. 91-92).

Current Trends in Multicultural Publishing

Offering a publisher’s point of view, Hudson (1991) of Just Us Books asserts that there are many good books out there, but that many children, particularly those in multicultural communities, are not aware of these books. The lack of awareness on the part of both parents and children about the body of authentic multicultural fiction that does exist is due to the limited availability of these kinds of books in many communities. Bookstores do not carry a significant amount of multicultural literature because the people in charge of buying say they don’t see a viable market for such books. Hudson argues that if publishers had seriously considered promotions and sales in the framework of multicultural publishing, this would not be the case.

According to Hudson, the solution to this kind of difficulty in the publishing world is for the major publishing houses to publish more books that reflect society’s diversity, and more importantly, for African

Americans and other ethnic people to establish their own publishing houses to offer alternatives to mainstream publishing. Instituting these kinds of changes requires that people with a stake in bringing other cultural perspectives into the mainstream take an active role in trying to reach those markets that the major publishing houses have overlooked. As Hudson points out "it is the only way that we can make a total difference in terms of producing quality books and getting them into the hands of children" (p.78). The quality and quantity of the multicultural content of the new books as well as the publisher backlists and promotional materials at the beginning of the twenty-first century will establish the profundity of the current publishing commitment to multicultural literature.

As educators we can contribute to the production and dissemination of multicultural literature by beginning to value student voices. This challenge means obtaining and reviewing authentic multicultural literature and giving it to our students. Continuing to disregard the literature of diverse groups is not only unrealistic and unscholarly, but also a disservice to the students educators teach. In a country that recognises a commitment to multiculturalism it is indefensible to deny our students a look at the world through the eyes of all its authors. To continue to teach a literary canon dominated by largely white, male authors is forever to keep students of color on the other side of the wall of "difference". Moreover, they will continue to be denied the opportunity to see that they possess a literary heritage that merits academic study. To portray the mainstream view of literary culture as the only one there is because of lack of knowledge is not only a display of ethnocentrism on the part of educators, it is an unfair method of keeping many students from discovering parts of themselves through literary experiences to which they can relate.

CHAPTER THREE

Analytic Framework

The theory of knowledge informing this research draws heavily on the work of Louise Rosenblatt and other writers working in the field of literature and education who believe that literature is experience, not information, and that the reader must be invited to participate in the experience, not simply to observe it from the outside. The idea that literature provides a “living through” and not just “knowledge about” places great importance on the role of the reader in the literary transaction (Rosenblatt, 1976). No longer regarded as a passive recipient of information, the reader is a maker of knowledge out of meetings with literary texts. This concept of the reader is based on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is made, not found, and that the occupation of making knowledge is not restricted to professionals and academics, but is everyone’s task (Probst, 1984). The research indicating that children are active participants in the creation of meaning suggests that in a supportive reading environment they can be helped to become aware of issues raised in books like the ones included in this study. Thematic content analysis proposes to help educators understand these issues by providing contextually based insights that are socially relevant, and by demonstrating the use of multicultural literature as a means of making the world a more equitable place to live.

Because I am interested in the opportunities provided by literature for students to explore issues critical to their lives, thematic content analysis is a useful method for describing the potentialities of a particular text. This form of analysis is concerned with two types of understanding: 1) How the theme of cultural identity is explored in each of the novels, and 2) What social insights can be gained by the reader from each literary transaction. My study’s focus on the potential of each novel to engage the reader informs the need for a method that effectively describes the nature of the “lived through” evocation of the literary work (Rosenblatt, 1978). Thematic content analysis was chosen for this study because of its descriptive power, its ability to clarify the work as evoked, to record the characters encountered or empathized with, and to hold on to the special quality and texture of the reading experience.

The form of analysis that I will bring to my reading of the novels is indebted to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of literature, which emphasizes the relationship with and continuing awareness of the text. According to Rosenblatt, reading is a transaction, a two way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances. During the reading event the reader's past experiences of language and the world synthesize with the multiple possibilities offered by the text into an organized meaning. The activity of interpretation in Rosenblatt's view consists of five steps:

1. Characterizing the work in terms of emotional response
2. Reporting the sequence of ideas and the attitude of the persona
3. Describing the characters—details, actions, psychology
4. Discussing the structure of the work
5. Emphasizing the symbolic content (1978, p. 136).

Given this model's emphasis on the importance of the reader in constructing meaning, my research recognizes that all of my observations regarding the texts will be strongly influenced by my own interests, purposes, and attitudes. The very nature of literary inquiry requires the reader to construct an interpretation out of the reality encountered in the text. Because no absolute reality exists to inform the reader's interpretation of a particular text, the terms objectivity and subjectivity need to be recast in order to have any significance for literary analysis. The traditional notion of an impersonal, objective criticism is of little value to inquiry that views literary texts as susceptible to multiple interpretations. Transactional theory pushes aside preoccupations with the ideal reader, or one absolute, correct reading, advocating instead the need to stress the "basic affinity of all readers of literary works of art" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 140). In this context meaningful interpretation is not an attempt to provide one ideal reading, but to consider the text, specifically the theme of cultural identity, in relation to specific readers and specific cultural contexts. Underlying this analytic framework is a humanistic concern for the meaningfulness of the individual reading experience to the "continuing life of the reader in all its facets—aesthetic, moral, economic, or social" (p. 161).

Book Selection Procedure

For the purpose of this study nine novels were chosen from a variety of sources listing notable titles for young adults published between 1985-1996 in the genre of realistic, multicultural fiction. Although a larger sample would have been desirable for presenting a greater variety of cultural experiences it would not enhance the internal validity of the research. Because this study was intended to describe thematic content, which invites the reader into a more meaningful transaction with a particular text, the depth of analysis is more important than the quantity of books selected. Cai (1993), who made thematic connections between three historical realistic fiction books portraying the Chinese American experience of being caught between two cultural worlds, employed a similar procedure on a smaller scale.

The novels for this study were compiled from several sources: *Culturally Diverse Library Collections for Youth* (Totter & Brown, 1994); *Dealing with Diversity Through Multicultural Fiction* (Johnson & Smith); *Crossing the Mainstream: Multicultural Perspectives in Teaching Literature* (Oliver, 1994); and *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World* (Rochman, 1993). To aid in the selection process professional review sources such as *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Resource Links*, and the *Council on Interracial Books for Children* were consulted. All of these sources regularly call attention to young adult multicultural books, and gather lists of these titles by cultural group, genre, and intended audience. Three young adult novels were chosen from each of the following cultures: African American, Asian American, and Native American. Literary works from these three cultures were selected for analysis because literature from these areas is some of the most under-represented in published material. The Cooperative Children's Book Center reports that in 1990 of the over 5000 books published, only 51 were written or illustrated by African Americans. They report that it is even more difficult to locate books by Native American, Asian American, or Hispanic authors (Lindgren, 1991). I have selected current multicultural titles to draw educators' attention to recent publications that are worthy of critical analysis but are likely not to have been encountered by a wide audience.

The young adult genre was chosen for analysis because of the depth of experience portrayed in books for this age level, and because of the relevance of the issue of cultural identity to young adolescents. A concern for formulating a personal sense of self is a recurring theme in literature for adolescents across cultures (Bushman, 1993). Because the theme of personal identity resonates with the developmental needs of young adults it is an important area of study. Rosenthal (1987) found developing a sense of identity to be one of the most challenging and important tasks for the adolescent. This task requires both self-awareness and an understanding of one's place in society. Theorists who have examined the development of ethnic identity recognize early adolescence as a crucial time when children of color experience an ethnic awakening, a conscious confrontation with this aspect of their personal and group identity (Kiah, 1985).

In the interest of connecting students to literature that is relevant to their experience, realistic fiction books were used in this study because the problems and issues that the characters confront are similar to those that young adolescents experience every day. Reader response research reveals that young people enjoy books and stories that portray real life situations with which they can identify (Hornburger, 1975). Thompson's (1991) content analysis of 25 children's books portraying African American families found that texts from the realistic fiction genre contained the most authentic portrayals.

To describe the kind of books included in this analysis I have adopted Simms' (1982) term "culturally conscious fiction". In a survey and analysis of 150 fiction books published between 1965 and 1979 (Simms, 1982) used the label "culturally conscious fiction" to describe books that illuminate the experience of growing up a member of a particular, non-white cultural group. This kind of book often portrays character, setting, and theme, in part by describing the specifics of daily living that will be recognizable to members of the group. Such specifics might include "language styles and patterns, religious beliefs and practices, musical preferences, family configurations and relationships, social mores, and numerous other behaviors, attitudes and values shared by the members of a cultural group" (p. 44).

Culturally conscious fiction often features children of color experiencing contemporary situations and conflicts, a type of story that is frequently neglected by educators and publishers (Aoki, 1993). Simms (1982) believes that culturally conscious books were the most successful books in her survey, and attributes their authenticity to the fact that most of the books were written from an insider's perspective. Simms refers to the authors of culturally conscious fiction as the "image makers" for their special use of detail to

make the reader see, feel, and hear with the characters in the story. In Simms' view "it is precisely through such specific detail that image makers cast the spells that make us see the world through their eyes" (p. 24).

The realistic multicultural fiction titles were selected on the basis of three criteria:

1. **Characterization:** the characters in the novel are complex portrayals that show a range of human responses and emotions, which develop naturally through the events in the story. Believable portrayals of people of color and people of diverse ethnicity can help dispel stereotypes and encourage students to identify and empathize with the characters.

Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* is an excellent example of a convincing and complex portrayal of nonmainstream experience. The novel's "invisible man" is an African American who, throughout the novel, is in search of his identity. As the book progresses the reader sees the protagonist grow and change as a result of the events in the story. The invisible man's ability to reflect meaningfully on his experiences reveals a depth of character that encourages the reader to empathize with his struggles. The protagonist's perceptual shift from confused naivete to an awareness of his invisibility shows the evolution of his understanding of self. At the end of the novel he understands history as a defining force but not as a limiting one. He sees himself not as representative of a race but as an individual. The novel seeks to dispel racial stereotypes by allowing the invisible man to accept the personal power of his identity. The complexity of a character like Ellison's invisible man allows the reader to experience a range of human responses and emotions that act as a bridge between the world of the novel and the world of the reader.

2. **Theme:** each of the novels deals in a meaningful way with the issue of cultural identity, specifically the challenge of formulating a personal sense of self, and/or a social sense of self in an environment where characters must confront differences between their cultural heritage and the cultural environment they live in. Violato and Holden (1985) distinguish between the development of the personal self and the social self. The task of developing a private self should address the struggle to answer questions such as: who am I? or why am I here? Definition of the self in the public sphere should address the concern of how the individual should relate to the larger social world. The development of the social should focus on characteristics and relationships that are more observable than those related to the private self and should ask questions such as: who am I as I interact with the world? How am I perceived by others?

3. Authenticity of cultural voice: the perspective of each author was evaluated in terms of its effect on the book's cultural authenticity. The issue of authenticity has become a controversial criterion in the critical evaluation of multicultural fiction because it asks the question: for whom does the author have the right to speak? Some scholars argue that a writer who is not from the same cultural background as the main character is more likely to write from an outsider's point of view, while an author from the same culture will write from an insider's perspective (Johnson & Smith, 1993). At the center of the issue of authenticity are beliefs about cultural imperialism versus self-affirmation. Do whites, who have historically been perceived as the oppressors, have the right to appropriate the voice of the oppressed? Simms (1982) points out that to frame the issue in these terms is an oversimplification. The source of the debate is not simply racial or ethnic background, but "cultural affinity, sensitivity, and sensibility" (p. 13).

Referring to African American literature, Simms asserts that the most revealing criticism of white authors writing fiction about African American experience has been that their own experience of growing up white in a society that confers automatic privilege and social superiority has determined their authorial perspective. African American author Richard Wright (1972) defines this notion of perspective as "that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and suffering of his people" (p. 341). To reach this point the author travels a road paved with life experiences and personal observations. The author uses these experiences to construct a world view: one that is both similar to and different from that of other Americans, but that is not likely to be shared by many white authors (Simms, 1982). What all of this points to is the conviction that no matter how adept a storyteller the writer is, the authenticity of his/her work will be lessened because the "fixed point in intellectual space" from which the author views the experiences of others remains too far from the point where someone inside of that culture would view them.

Given that the specific content under analysis in this study deals with the theme of cultural identity, I have adopted Wright's notion of intellectual space to define the criteria for cultural authenticity. In the interest of giving the most authentic voice possible to nonmainstream experience, I embraced the need for an insider's perspective in each of the novels included in this study.

After reading extensively in the area of young adult multicultural fiction I selected 17 book titles for possible consideration in this study.¹ During my second reading of the books I applied the 3 book selection criteria which allowed me to narrow my preliminary list of titles down to 9. The young adult realistic, multicultural fiction titles selected for analysis in this study are as follows:

1. *Fast Talk on a Slow Track*- Rita Williams Garcia (1991)
2. *Hold Fast to Dreams* - Andrea Davis Pinkney (1996)
3. *Yoruba Girl Dancing* - Simi Bedford (1991)
4. *Saying Goodbye* - Marie G. Lee (1990)
5. *The Sunita Experiment* - Mitali Perkins (1993)
6. *Thief of Hearts* - Lawrence Yep (1995)
7. *My Name is Seepeetza* - Shirley Sterling (1992)
8. *Silent Words* - Ruby Slipperjack (1992)
9. *The Ceremony of Innocence* – Jamake Highwater (1985)

Although my delimitations section pointed out the impossibility for one book to represent the diverse experiences of any ethnic or racial group, I have tried in each category to include books that portray a range of cultural perspectives and experiences. For example, the titles under the African American heading explore the theme of cultural identity from several different points of view: In *Fast Talk on a Slow Track* we see through the eyes of a young African American man who lives in a middle class suburb; in *Hold Fast to Dreams* we experience the complexities of private school life from the perspective of a young African American woman who suddenly finds herself in an affluent and mostly all white neighborhood; and in *Yoruba Girl Dancing* we journey from the privileged world of African nobility to the world of the rigid British school system.

In addition to the criteria already discussed, all of the books selected for this study were chosen for their ability to create a personal and culturally authentic point of view. A major goal of my book selection process was to find culturally sensitive voices to tell stories that readers from diverse backgrounds would want to hear.

¹ See appendix A for a complete list of preliminary book titles.

Method and Analysis

Once the titles were selected I engaged in a preliminary reading of the texts followed by a close reading. The preliminary reading allowed me to familiarize myself with the general narrative of the selected book, and during the second reading I applied the specific criteria for my two-part analysis. The first part of the analysis looked specifically at the thematic content of the novels, while the second part considered the meaningfulness of the work in relation to the young adolescent reader.

The thematic content of each novel was evaluated in terms of its potential for reader engagement using the criteria established by Purves and Monson (1984). The questions for inquiry included: (a) is the issue of cultural identity glossed over or presented realistically in a way that a young adolescent can understand? (b) does the book explore the complexities of theme in a naturalistic way? This criterion refers to whether statements about cultural heritage are built into the structure of the story or are presented in terms of didactic messages; and (c) how successfully does the novel's treatment of theme fulfil its apparent purpose?

Analysis of meaningfulness refers to the writer's seriousness and the importance of the issues raised in his/her work. Multicultural literature by definition deals with serious issues because it represents the history and experiences of diverse groups, not just those who have traditionally been part of the mainstream. However, it is how these experiences are depicted that determines the novel's depth of meaning. African American writer Walter Dean Myers (1991) believes that what he has to give young people "is the cultural substance of [his] experience and [the ability] to recognize that experience as part of African- American life" (p. 120). Myers points out that often young people don't realize that they are part of a culture: he claims that it is his responsibility as a writer to tell them that they are: "That is our job, as multicultural writers and people interested in the multicultural experience, to share the gift of each culture that we think we have forgotten" (p. 121). To assess meaningfulness I evaluated the books in terms of several criteria: (a) does the book show sensitivity to socio-cultural and historical concerns? - this refers to whether or not the book reflects a conscious effort to provide the reader with a realistic sense of a particular cultural identity as it is today and what it has been in the past; (b) does the novel address issues important to

people of dual racial and cultural heritage? - a crucial consideration in evaluating the novel's treatment of the theme of cultural identity is whether cultural assimilation is attempted at the expense of cultural identity: and (c) in terms of presenting realistic characters and situations does the author simply give the reader reportage, as if he or she is taking them on a tour, or does the reader see and feel with the main characters? In *Child of the Owl* Lawrence Yep portrays the Chinese-American experience of being caught between two worlds - the traditional world of Chinatown and the contemporary world of mainstream white Americans. The author's description of the former reveals the power of history to shape individual identity. Yep presents Chinatown metaphorically, as a school for educating the younger generation of Chinese-Americans in the Chinese cultural heritage (Cai, 1992, p. 111). Although the author views Chinatown as a kind of cultural stronghold, the Chinatown that he describes for the reader is neither a Utopia nor an idealistic haven for the Chinese. In the interest of creating a realistic picture of Chinatown he shows its dark side as well.

In depicting life in Chinatown Yep does not merely provide the reader with physical descriptions: the reader not only sees, but feels with the novel's main character Casey. The book's depth of meaning is revealed in Casey's experiences. Her stay in Chinatown teaches her to love her own cultural identity. She is able to substantiate her original theory that "there must be something good to being a Chinese"(Yep, 1977). Casey finds love of her heritage more in the traditional values of Chinese culture than in its customs and manners (Cai, 1991, p. 110).

Analysis of meaningfulness according to the aforementioned criteria will provide an understanding of the ways in which the selected books deal with the theme of cultural identity as people explore it from three distinct cultures. Although the focus of my discussion is on the content of the novels, my analysis is intended to show that literary quality need not be sacrificed for cultural and historical authenticity.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Analysis of the Books

African American

Hold Fast to Dreams

Summary

12 year old Deirdre (Dee) Willis faces many new challenges when she and her family relocate from Baltimore to an all white suburb in Connecticut. Leaving behind her friends and familiar surroundings Deirdre must adjust to life in a new school and a new neighborhood. For the first time Deirdre finds herself an outsider and is made painfully aware that her dark skin sets her apart from the other kids at her school. Deirdre's alienation is further increased by her inability to play lacrosse, the most popular sport at Wexford Middle School. A champion double-dutch player in her old neighborhood, Deirdre is homesick for the friends and activities that she enjoyed in her old home. Deirdre's most painful discovery occurs when she finds out that she is not the only one experiencing difficulty as the result of her family's move to Wexford. Deirdre's father and younger sister also confront prejudice and must struggle to find ways to improve their situations.

Drawing on the love and support of her family and on the strength of a new friendship Deirdre resolves to show Wexford what she's got. A talented photographer, Deirdre decides to enter her photographs in the prestigious Wexford talent contest. Deirdre finds the determination to succeed in Wexford, in part, by following her father's example of strength and integrity. Refusing to allow himself to be intimidated by a prejudiced security guard Deirdre's father asserts his right to respect from his coworkers and retains his confidence in his abilities. Following her father's example Deirdre refuses to allow herself to be pushed to the sidelines and enters her photographs in the talent contest. After receiving second prize Deirdre's confidence in herself is restored and the novel ends the story of the Willis family's adjustment to Wexford, Connecticut on a positive note.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

In *Hold Fast to Dreams* the novel's main idea of coming to terms with one's cultural identity is confronted head on, and the story deals frankly with issues of prejudice and racial difference. Once Deirdre discovers that her family is going to be one of the only black families in the neighborhood, and that she is likely to be the only black student at her school, she begins to see herself and her relationships with others, particularly white people in a different light. At her old home in Baltimore Deirdre had an active social life and a clear sense of belonging. However, when her family relocates to Connecticut the sense of comfort and security that came from being surrounded by her friends and neighbors is taken away. In her new surroundings Deirdre must overcome challenges at home and at school before she can regain her sense of belonging and make Wexford her home.

The thematic content at the heart of *Hold Fast to Dreams* deals with the misconceptions that white kids and black kids have about one another. Having encountered so few white people in her Baltimore neighborhood Deirdre is unsure of her ability to get along with people that she sees as different from herself. Deirdre's worst fears are confirmed when she gets on a school bus and is greeted by a sea of white faces. Feeling like an outsider for the first time in her life Dee doubts whether she will be able to make friends in her new environment. Dee must learn to deal not only with other people's prejudices but with her own as well. Although Dee is made uncomfortable by the curious stares that she receives from her classmates, Dee herself is suspicious of white people and the way she believes they see black kids like her. Before coming to Wexford Deirdre is warned by her best friend Lorelle to be careful of "white girls with an attitude" (Pinkney, 1996, p. 41). Because Dee had met so few white people she rarely had the opportunity to really think about how she felt about them. However, when Dee becomes friends with a white girl named Web she is forced to reexamine some of her earlier judgements about white people. She admits to Web that in her neighborhood it was common for black kids to talk down white kids. When Web asks her if she ever said bad things about whites, Dee is reluctant to answer because she knows that although she'd talked with her friends back home about white kids being prejudiced, she doesn't want to offend her new

friend whom she is beginning to like: "I'd had a million mean things I'd said about white people at one time or another. But I couldn't say them to Web. Web was *Web*" (p. 67). Once Dee has the opportunity to get to know a white girl she begins to see her as a person instead of as a color with an attitude.

Dee's opinion of white people is not reformed entirely, however, for she receives enough prejudiced treatment from some of the other girls at her school to reinforce her belief that some white people get all "uptight around black folks" (p. 69). Dee's arrival at Wexford Middle School arouses the suspicion of one classmate who tells Web to be careful of Dee and her family because they "could be trouble" (p. 65). Deirdre is not the only one in her family to experience racial injustice: Dee's younger sister, Lindsay, suffers cruel treatment at the hands of her lacrosse teammates who tease her about the appearance of her hair. Daring her to "wash that Brillo frizz" out of her braids by using hot water, Lindsay's teammates succeed in humiliating her to the point where she considers quitting the lacrosse team.

Dee's much admired father must also face the sting of racial injustice at his new company where he is the only black man. After working late at the office Dee's father is backed against a wall by an unfriendly security guard who insists on seeing his identification. When confronted by the security guard's racist attitude Dee's father asserts his right to be treated with respect: "You've seen me. You've seen my I.D. Look at me. Take a *good look* at my face, man. I'm not a stranger: I work here. I *belong* here. Just like you. I'm not going to let you stand there and intimidate me" (p. 79). Deirdre's father's refusal to let his authority be undermined enables him to regain the integrity that the security guard tried to take away.

The characters in *Hold Fast to Dreams* confront realistic situations of prejudice and discrimination where they must overcome the negative attitudes of others by asserting their pride in themselves and by drawing on one another's strength and support. The members of the Willis family explore the theme of cultural identity in a way that reaffirms cultural heritage as the corner stone of family and racial pride. The novel achieves this goal by creating life-like characters who come to realizations about themselves and the world around them in a naturalistic way. The novel's treatment of cultural identity is illustrated in the way each of the main characters chooses to resolve his or her conflict. For Deirdre the challenge to make a life for herself in Wexford Connecticut is twofold; she must deal with the prejudice that exists in some of the people that she encounters, but more importantly she must regain the sense of pride and confidence in herself that she had in Baltimore. For Dee this means not resigning herself to the sidelines of Wexford

Middle School but choosing instead to “stand proud and to show everybody what I got” (p. 96). The Wexford Founders’ Day Assembly provides Deirdre with the opportunity she needs to show off her photography talent. After receiving much support and encouragement from her family and from her new friend Web, Dee is able to overcome the suspicious dislike of some of the other girls at school and to use Founders’ Day as a chance to shine.

Deirdre’s resolution of her difficulties at Wexford Middle School is intimately intertwined with her sister’s difficulties at Green Crest Academy and her father’s troubles at the office. It is only after Dee shares her problems with her family that she is able to find the determination to change her situation at school. Both Dee and her younger sister look to their parents, and especially to their father for advice on how to deal with being “messed with by white people” (p. 76). What Dee and her sister learn from their father is pride in being black and feeling worthy of white people’s respect. He tells them that when he feels the fear and loneliness catch up with him he reminds himself that he is not “the only black person who’s trying to prove himself in a white man’s world,” and looks to his family for comfort and strength. When Dee asks her father how he responds when people stare he tells her: “When white folks stare and wonder and show disrespect, its best to kindly—but firmly—let them know that you won’t stand for it” (p. 82). What Dee’s father gives to his family is a voice for resistance, a way of handling racial injustice head on. From listening to how their father handled a similar problem, both Deirdre and her sister are able to reexamine their situation and to look for a way to speak their own minds. The model of social action that is both discussed and lived by the Willis family is that racism must be confronted with the insistent demand that all people are entitled to dignity and respect. For Lindsay this means telling her coach and her teammates that she won’t score points for a school where she is treated badly by her teammates. Lindsay receives an apology from the girls who insulted her, but more importantly she lets them know that she will no longer put up with their abuse. At the end of the novel Lindsay feels able to assert her right to respect on her own terms and not by putting on a show of acting white.

Hold Fast to Dreams explores the complexities of theme by focusing on the development of characters’ actions in their efforts to come to terms with who they are and with what is important to them. Preachy statements are avoided in favor of showing characters’ natural evolution of growth and understanding. The novel effectively captures the hopes and struggles of the Willis family and other

upwardly mobile African Americans. The daily life of the Willis family is drawn with careful consideration. The relationships between each of the family members are witty and believable. The particular strength underlying *Hold Fast to Dreams* is that the novel's characters and the situations that they encounter have the undeniable ring of authenticity. Although the main characters in the novel are able to resolve their various conflicts, the novel does not propose a solution to the complex issues of prejudice and racial differences raised in the novel. Feeling strong inside and being proud of who you are is stressed above learning to get along with those who belittle you.

The richness of the novel's thematic content is also apparent in its honest portrayal of both white and black attitudes. Although the prejudicial treatment experienced by Dee and her family is the focus, the novel does not fail to point out that both black kids and white kids view one another in terms of stereotypes and that prejudice and misunderstanding about racial differences can go both ways.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

One of the major strengths of *Hold Fast to Dreams* is its thoughtful treatment of sociocultural and historical concerns. The various issues arising from these concerns are interwoven with the novel's major themes so that their presence is felt throughout the story. The most important way in which sociocultural content is explored is in the family relationships portrayed in the novel. The Willises are a close knit family who enjoy one another's company and who turn to one another for support and guidance. When the reader is first introduced to Deirdre she had just woken up from a dream in which she found herself in a place where the moon was black and the sky was white and everyone around her thought that this was normal. When Deirdre confides in her mother about the dream and her fears about going to an all white school, her mother shares her own fear and uncertainty with her daughter. She also tells Deirdre about her dream that the move to Wexford will give her all of the kinds of experiences that she and Deirdre's father never had. The conversation between Deirdre and her mother at the beginning of the novel introduces the reader to one of the novel's sociocultural themes, the dream of a better life for a new generation. The motivation behind Deirdre's parents' decision to move to Wexford Connecticut is the desire to provide a better life for Deirdre and her sister than the one they had growing up. The Willises' dream for their children is one of material comfort and security, things that have not always come easily to African

Americans. Deirdre's family's ethos is one of working hard and maintaining one's integrity in the struggle for success. When Dee tells her mother about her dislike of Wexford she becomes frustrated by her mother's attempt to use the past to explain to her about their decision to move. Deirdre complains: "I can't tell you anything without getting some dumb lecture about being black and working hard" (p. 18). Dee finds it difficult to understand how her mother's and father's past has shaped their outlook on life. History has influenced Deirdre's parents because they know what it means to struggle for success in a world where opportunities for African Americans are few and far between. Deirdre's mother tries to use family history as a way of explaining to Dee how important the dream of moving up in the world is to Deirdre's father. When Dee's mother tells her how her father worked delivering papers so that he could afford to buy his mother a washing machine to make her life easier, Deirdre is unable to see how the story about her father has anything to do with her. However, as the story unfolds and Dee learns more about her father's struggles she begins to understand how they resemble her own. The novel's references to the past provide the reader with valuable insights into the pressures affecting African Americans looking for a better life.

Another example of the novel's sociocultural sensitivity is its awareness of African American artists like Langston Hughes who made important contributions to African American culture. Dee's enthusiasm for Hughes's poetry and her interest in the man himself reveal not only her own sense of pride in her cultural heritage but a desire to share it with others. When Deirdre discovers that none of her new classmates knows who Langston Hughes is she is surprised and somewhat disgusted. She does not view Langston Hughes as a great African American poet, but a great poet in general, a distinction that the novel does not fail to make explicit.

Hold Fast to Dreams is successful in creating a sense of place in the novel by including details that bring the cultural community of the Willis family to life. Dee's comparison of life in Baltimore and her family's new home in Connecticut gives the reader a sense of the way community acts as a source of support for cultural identity. When Dee leaves her Baltimore neighborhood behind she feels as though she is losing a piece of her Black culture. When Dee thinks about life in Baltimore she remembers her friends and neighbors and the friendly way they greeted one another in the morning. On her way to school in Wexford, however, Dee points out the ways in which her new neighborhood is very different from her old one:

Our neighbors—people I'd never met—lived in houses set back off the road, houses secluded by trees. Homes kept a deliberate distance from one another. 'Suburban privacy' is what Dad called it. ...I leaned against the wall and listened to the sound of no sound—no cars, no kids, no neighbors sending out a 'How do you do?' The damp air hung silent (p. 63).

Dee finds it difficult to understand why her father's new job earning more money must mean a sacrifice of all that is comfortable and familiar. However, although Dee sees the move as disastrous her father sees the move to Wexford as a chance to ensure the family's comfort and security. The same neighborhood that gives Dee such a strong sense of belonging is the same place that causes her father to fear for his children's safety. *Hold Fast to Dreams* sensitively explores how upwardly mobile African Americans are often forced to choose between remaining in a supportive cultural community and a life of affluence and material comfort.

Although written for a young audience, *Hold Fast to Dreams* does not fail to address the important issues surrounding the theme of cultural identity. The characters in the novel struggle with the fact that it is much harder to be a Black person in the all white world of Wexford, Connecticut. With so few Black people in the Wexford Community there are few opportunities for Wexford's inhabitants to challenge the stereotypes that they have built up about Black people, whom they rarely encounter. In *Hold Fast to Dreams* lack of understanding and awareness about racial difference leads to misunderstandings and prejudicial behavior. On Deirdre's sister's first day of school at Green Crest Academy, Lindsay is asked by one of her classmates if she is part of some special inner-city minority program. In a community like Wexford, where white is the accepted norm, the onus is always on those who are different to explain their non-white presence. For Deirdre's sister the challenge to fit in at her new school is too great and she decides to "act white" so that she will be accepted by the other girls (p. 32). Although Lindsay believes she is just acting so that the girls at Green Crest will like her, she is, as Deirdre realizes, sacrificing her cultural identity in favor of cultural assimilation. The issue of changing oneself in order to be more acceptable to white standards runs throughout the novel. Just as Lindsay decides to "talk white. Act white" (p. 32), Deirdre's best friend Lorelle considers perming her naturally curly black hair so that it will lie flat. Deirdre immediately questions her friend's decision, instinctively feeling that this kind of a change shows a lack of pride in one's heritage. In an insightful passage about hair and racial difference Deirdre reveals pride in

who she is and a mature understanding about what the differences between white and black mean: "As tight curled as it is, I've always liked my hair. Besides, Jell-O is good: fighting on the playground is bad. Hair is just hair" (p. 45). Feeling good about oneself is at the heart of *Hold Fast to Dreams*' exploration of the theme of cultural identity. Believing that you are a person worthy of respect, and not pretending to be something you're not, is the important message underlying this young adult novel.

The story of *Hold Fast to Dreams* is told from the perspective of 12 year old Deirdre Willis, a strong and interesting character whose sensitivity allows her to reflect meaningfully on the challenges that she and her family face upon moving to Wexford, Connecticut. The novel's use of first person narration invites the reader to see through the young girl's eyes, enabling him or her to imagine the people and situations that Deirdre encounters through her comments and descriptions. The author's use of dialogue shows familiarity with the language patterns of black, middle class culture and helps to create complex, believable characters. Deirdre's presentation of her photo exhibit provides a good example of the kind of dialogue spoken in the novel: "Deirdre Willis is my name. I can't sing that good, and I don't know any magic tricks. But I take some pretty fine pictures. And I like poems by Langston Hughes" (p. 102). Infused with convincing actions and emotions Deirdre Willis's narration of *Hold Fast to Dreams* is both funny and realistic. The reader is given an insider's perspective of a middle class family who are made believable by the narrator's use of detail. Family rituals like the evening meal are given special attention. The kind of food being eaten and the care with which it is prepared are details that add to the texture and quality of the cultural experience depicted in the novel. Offering insight into the cultural backgrounds and social relationships of the characters in the novel *Hold Fast to Dreams* arouses the reader's interest in Deirdre Willis and her search for a place to belong. Drawing on African American culture and history the novel explores how Deirdre's experience of growing up African American affects the way she sees herself in relation to black friends and family members and to the largely white society that she encounters in Wexford. The reader sees and feels with Deirdre as she moves from her home community of black friends and family where she feels that she belongs, to the unknown white community of Wexford where she feels herself to be an outsider. The engaging thematic content of *Hold Fast to Dreams* envelops the reader in the actions and thoughts of Deirdre Willis who tells her story with warmth and sensitivity.

The optimism one feels about Deirdre at the end of the novel is a function of the way the author has described her growth and maturation. It is also a function of the reader's sense that the family has nurtured in her the strength, will, and determination to maintain her self respect in an environment that may try to deny her this consideration. *Hold Fast to Dreams* seeks to inform the reader that although the world continues to be troubled by racial injustices, hope and determination continue to grow and flourish.

Fast Talk On A Slow Track

Summary

Fast Talk On A Slow Track tells the story of Denzel Watson, who for 18 years has been an academic success story. Accepted at Princeton University and elected valedictorian of his senior class Denzel seems destined for success until he attends the Princeton summer program for minority students. When Denzel experiences his first taste of failure he discovers that his “fast talk” is not invincible and begins to lose his confidence in his ability to succeed. Convinced that he will not be able to survive at Princeton Denzel decides not to attend college in the fall and struggles with how to break the news to his proud family. For the first time in his life Denzel is unsure of who he is and where he is going. Suffocating beneath the burden of his parents’ expectations, and his community’s desire to make him a black role model, Denzel takes a job as a door to door salesperson. In his new job Denzel becomes obsessed with beating out fellow salesman Carmello (Mello), a poor high-school dropout with none of Denzel’s advantages of a supportive family and a good education. As Denzel’s rivalry with Mello intensifies he moves farther away from regaining the courage he needs to confront his fear of failure and return to Princeton in the fall. Denzel’s final show-down with Mello sets him back on the path of self discovery where he finally begins to understand how his rejection of his cultural identity, and his attempts to talk his way through life are responsible for his fear of failure. Through the support of his family and the Black community he discovers at Princeton, Denzel is able to regain his confidence and begin to work toward his goals.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

In *Fast Talk On A Slow Track* the theme of cultural identity is skillfully interwoven with the novel’s story about a young Black man’s self discovery. The novel begins at Princeton where Denzel Watson is attending a summer program for minority students from under-enriched educational backgrounds. Denzel has just woken up from a nightmare where an unseen voice tells him: “Denzel come to the front of the class. Take off your face. Show the class your face. Denzel we’re waiting. Take off

your face" (Williams-Garcia, 1991, p.1). In his dream Denzel is struggling with IT, a seemingly supernatural force that threatens to tear Denzel to bits with its black and orange claws. IT represents Denzel's fear of failure which is aroused when he goes to Princeton and finds that he cannot coast his way through his classes the way he did in high-school. When Denzel receives his first failing grade he begins to doubt his ability to survive at University. Denzel's feelings of insecurity are heightened by the other minority students who seem to accept the fact that they must work harder in order to succeed. Denzel feels degraded by the knowledge that the stellar academic reputation he enjoyed during high school is not enough to distinguish him among the competition at Princeton. Denzel resents what he perceives to be his fellow classmates' lack of faith in their own intelligence, and is particularly disturbed by his roommate Arnold's conviction that as minority students they have to do more to prove that they belong: "Let's face it Denzel, Twenty percent of our grades are for good conduct in a war zone, not academic ability. Our ninety-fives are equivalent to their seventy-fives" (p. 4). Rejecting Arnold's dismal view of their education Denzel makes fun of Arnold and the other students for what he perceives to be their inferiority complex. Unwilling to admit his own insecurities about competing at Princeton Denzel continues to rely on his "fast talk" method of getting good grades, which means expending as little effort as possible. However, when one of his professors sees through his fast talk and reproaches him for his lack of academic honor Denzel cannot bear the humiliation of failure.

Denzel's feelings of insecurity ignite in him a profound sense of confusion over who he is supposed to be. When he finds himself struggling at Princeton he doubts whether he can fulfil his parents' expectations of him. The pressure to be a role model for the Black community becomes too intense and his self confidence continues to crumble. Denzel's anxiety is heightened by the fact that he has no one to talk to. Alienated from his classmates and unable to confide in his parents Denzel feels alone even when he is surrounded by friends and family. Denzel's fierce sense of pride and instinct for competition are responsible for the difficulty he has in relating to others. Although Denzel feels the need to tell someone about his experience at Princeton he is afraid to talk to his cousin Randy because he doesn't want to lose ground in the contest that Denzel imagines exists between them. Because he is obsessed with losing hollow victories to even his closest friends, Denzel is unable to get the support he needs to overcome his fear of failure. The harder Denzel tries to deny his feelings about Princeton the stronger they become.

Wendy Kilpatrick, Denzel's best friend and fiercest rival, is the one person who offers Denzel some insight into difficulties he is experiencing. Having competed with one another for every academic honor since grade school, Wendy understands that Denzel's inflated ego and lazy attitude towards school are his greatest stumbling blocks. However, when Wendy confronts Denzel with his shortcomings, telling him that he was elected Valedictorian instead of her because he's Black and she's white, Denzel refuses to listen to her even though he is secretly afraid that she may be right. Wendy's accusation: "I always worked harder. I gave correct answers while you were being credited for dressing it up with your big words and your big talk" (p. 32) hits home with Denzel because he knows that his approach to school has been to take the easy way out whenever possible. Unwilling to admit how much Wendy's words have upset him, Denzel accuses her of being jealous and acting like a "white girl" (p. 32). Denzel's confrontation with Wendy is significant because it suggests, as did Arnold's comments earlier in the novel, that the inequities in the education system have led to different standards of achievement for white kids and Black kids. Because less is expected in terms of achievement by students of color, the system is quick to give credit to students who surpass its lowly expectations for them. Denzel allows his insecurities about his education to take over and tries to talk himself out of going to Princeton. Having relied on the strength of his personality and his fast talk for so long, Denzel is afraid that he has no other means of achieving the success he so desperately wants.

The theme of cultural identity is central to Denzel's conflict because he fears that embracing his African heritage will mean that he will turn out just like his father whose commitment to Black activism has cost him personal success. Denzel resents his father's attempt to connect him to his African heritage by giving him an African name. Embarrassed by his father's zeal for Black causes Denzel chooses to defy his father by changing his name from Dinizulu to Denzel. Denzel's contempt for his African heritage is revealed in one of his successful sales pitches. Pretending to be a third world refugee named Dinizulu, he goes door to door selling cookies and collecting money for his famine torn country. Denzel's mockery of his African heritage shows his unwillingness to recognize that Dinizulu is a part of him. Denzel's lack of awareness about his cultural identity leads him to draw on inaccurate portrayals of Black culture and to make fun of human aid efforts. "I made the sale, said 'Ungawa'-something I had once heard on a Tarzan movie-and broke out into a joyous chorus of 'We Are the World'"(p. 46). By making Dinizulu part of his

sales act he is attempting to make his cultural identity into something that exists separately from him. He is not willing to recognize that his cultural heritage affects his life in any meaningful way.

Estranged from his friends and family Denzel finds himself adrift in a world that seems to have lost its moral center. Religion is another aspect of Denzel's culture that seems to have deserted him. Although Denzel's mother regards religion as a source of strength and support, his father sees religion as a crutch, and as another means to oppress the Black population. Denzel finds himself torn between his mother's faith and his father's cynicism. Now that he carries the burden of his family's expectations for him, however, church is no longer a safe haven, but a place for him to be held up and gawked at as a shining example of Black youth. Although this is a role that Denzel used to covet he now feels suffocated by all of the praise and admiration that is heaped on him. The pressure of being considered "nearly perfect" by the entire congregation is too much for Denzel to endure (p. 73). The adulation he receives from the Black community only reinforces his fear that he cannot live up to the impossibly high standards that have been set for him. Denzel's past achievements have not prepared him to be the pride of the Black community or to accept all of the responsibility that goes with this title.

The dream sequences that reoccur throughout the novel explore the complexities of Denzel's struggle with his identity in a naturalistic way. Built into the structure of the narrative Denzel's dreams lend insight into the nature of his fears and insecurities. In one of his dreams Denzel imagines himself at a desk in an office where he is looking at a two-sided brass nameplate with Dinizulu on one side and Denzel on the other. In his dream Denzel looks exactly like his father. Messages in the form of commands are thrown through the intercom and Denzel imagines himself responding to the commands like a robot. When the office turns into a train station Denzel discovers that he is unsure of where to go. Finding himself aboard one of the trains looking for an empty seat he encounters his friend Mello who offers to trade seats with him. Although in the dream Denzel doesn't want to trade seats with Mellow he fears that his seat is the only one left to him. Through the window of the train Denzel sees Wendy on the opposite track who tells him that she won't allow him to sit with her. Denzel's dream ends with him trying to battle IT with his two-sided nameplate, but he can't figure out which side to use--Denzel or Dinizulu.

Like Denzel's earlier dream, where he imagines the teacher telling him to take off his face, the second dream reveals Denzel's inner struggle to come to terms with his identity. Caught between his

parents' cultural pride and their expectations for him, and Mello's gritty world of illiteracy and poverty, Denzel is not sure where he deserves to be. Although he is afraid of failure and of disillusioning all of the people who believe in him, he cannot resign himself to a place in Mello's world where he will be unable to fulfil his ambitions. Denzel's dream provides the reader with insight into the source of his conflict. Denzel's fractured identity cannot be healed until he is able to tap into the courage and strength he needs to overcome his fear of failure.

Ironically, it is Denzel's return to Princeton in the fall that brings him closer to self-discovery. Although throughout the novel Denzel fears that Princeton will expose his inferiority, once he is able to let go of some of his insecurities his desire to learn is rekindled. Denzel begins to regain his confidence in his economics class where he finally begins to think rather than just talk off the top of his head. Once he is on his own at Princeton Denzel's attitude toward Black culture also begins to change. Although he dismisses his parents' suggestions that he become involved with the Black community, a chance meeting with some of his classmates from the summer minority program changes his mind. On his first visit to the Third World Centre Denzel is suspicious, thinking it will be filled with aggressive social activists like his father. Instead, Denzel is surprised to discover that he is comfortable there, that it reminds him of home. The play that Denzel sees at the center about a Black guide leading a group of blind freshman through the jungle is symbolic of his own experience. Throughout the novel Denzel has been lost, but by the end of the story he is beginning to find himself. He understands that embracing his Black identity does not mean that he must become a revolutionary like his father. He no longer sees the students from the summer program as the enemy, but as human beings sharing the same struggle to survive. Denzel's growing confidence in his ability to survive at Princeton is paralleled by his acceptance of who he is and where he comes from. His decision to sign his academic honor statement as *Dinizulu* is symbolic of his growth and maturation.

In *Fast Talk On A Slow Track* Denzel's exploration of his cultural identity is given specific meaning and import as it gradually informs his self-discovery. The novel goes beyond a surface treatment of the theme of cultural identity, delving deeper to uncover fears and uncertainties that are both culturally and individually situated. The fact that Denzel must struggle with himself, his friends and family, the Black community, and society at large shows how many obstacles Denzel must overcome on his journey of self-discovery.

The thematic content of *Fast Talk On A Slow Track* reminds readers of the diversity of Black voices. The novel shows how the experience of coming to terms with one's cultural identity is not only different for people from different racial or ethnic groups, but also for people who share the same cultural background. The novel achieves its purpose on two levels: it insightfully points out many of the challenges and issues relevant to young African Americans; and drawing on the strength of its well developed characters the novel shows the reader how personal and intense the process of coming to terms with one's cultural identity can be.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

Fast Talk On A Slow Track adeptly uncovers many of the tensions surrounding the achievement of status and material success. Drawing on both white and Black perspectives the novel allows the reader to see Denzel's achievements through the eyes of the Black community, and through the eyes of someone like Wendy, who regards Denzel as unfair competition. By exploring these different points of view the reader is better able to understand the nature of Denzel's struggle to find out who he is.

The novel's sensitivity to historical concerns is exemplified in Denzel's father, a former civil rights activist whom Denzel believes is hopelessly trapped in the past. The gap that exists between Denzel and his father is evident in their inability to communicate with one another. Denzel is embarrassed by his father's commitment to Black issues and resents his efforts to discover their family's African roots. He does not identify with his father's causes and is always looking to escape one of his father's "talks". The novel's exploration of Denzel's relationship with his father reveals important differences in the way younger generations of African Americans view their cultural past. Denzel's father's attempts to make him understand the significance of history, and Denzel's rejection of these attempts, show the frustration involved in trying to bridge the generation gap that separates them.

Another point of dissention between Denzel and his father arise from their different attitudes towards white people, particularly white women. Denzel cannot understand his father's inability to see white women as human beings. Denzel does not share his father's view of white women as the enemy, and his father's refusal to try to understand his son's feelings for a white girl pulls them even further apart. Another example of Denzel's father's prejudicial attitude occurs in his treatment of Denzel's friend Mello.

Although Mello is not white but of mixed racial heritage Denzel's father regards him as unsuitable company for his son. In response to his father's labeling of his friend as trouble, Denzel tells him that he would not be so quick to judge Mello if "he were on the Black side of the tracks"(p. 136). In Denzel's relationships with both friends and family, issues of race, class, and gender intersect in meaningful and often painful ways. In his efforts to come to terms with his identity Denzel tries to better understand the nature of his relationships with the important people in his life.

The sociocultural concern that is given the most attention in the novel is how African American youth handle the intense pressure to succeed that is placed on them. Many of Denzel's feelings of insecurity stem from the fact that he must not only succeed for himself but for his family and the entire Black community. Denzel feels asphyxiated by his parents' expectation that he become a role model for Black youth. Knowing that his parents view his going to Princeton as a sign of their family's status in the Black community Denzel begins to feel like a trophy instead of a person. In the eyes of his mother's church congregation Denzel's acceptance at Princeton is not only a personal victory for him, but a victory for the Black race as a whole. When Denzel is singled out for his achievements he becomes terrified at how much seems to be at stake on his success at university.

Unable to endure the pressure at home Denzel escapes to a world where he is never haunted by feelings of self-doubt. In his job as a salesperson Denzel is able to feel superior because he is surrounded by people who have none of his advantages, and who could not hope to compete in the world that he is running from. Vacillating between the upwardly mobile world of Denzel's family and the world of Denzel's high school drop out co-workers the novel juxtaposes Denzel's success and privileges with Mello's illiteracy and his struggle to make ends meet. Although both Denzel and his uneducated co-workers are people of color *Fast Talk On A Slow Track* exposes the many differences in their socio-economic backgrounds.

The treatment of the theme of cultural identity brings to light many issues important to people of dual cultural identity. Denzel's process of self-discovery is rewarding for readers because of its richness and complexity. The self-knowledge that Denzel achieves at the end of the novel is hard won and incomplete. His gradual opening up of himself to his cultural identity makes further exploration and discovery possible. A non-traditional Black youth, Denzel Watson's upwardly mobile, middle class voice

is unique for its ambition and refinement. The author effectively captures the tone and the colloquial expressions appropriate for someone of Denzel's age and social background. The voices and behaviors of the novel's supporting characters are equally realistic. Denzel's lower class co-workers are drawn with humor and sensitivity. Something of an anti-hero Denzel possesses many of the fears and insecurities that transform a fictional character into a living, breathing human being. Denzel's inflated ego and selfish behavior add to his character's believability. Denzel's feelings of both love and resentment towards his parents, and his attitude towards school are communicated to readers in a voice so authentic they feel as though they are living through Denzel's experiences with him. The Denzel at the end of the novel, although still recognizable as the cocky young man at the beginning of the story, has replaced much of his bravado and sarcasm with a sense of honor and the courage to fight his inner demons. By inviting the reader to identify with a sometimes unsympathetic character, the novel challenges the reader to see the world through different eyes, and to find meaning in his or her new vision.

African British

Yoruba Girl Dancing

Summary

In *Yoruba Girl Dancing* the action moves from Lagos, a small town in Nigeria, to London, England in the 1950's. The reader sees through the eyes of Remi, a precocious six year-old who enjoys a colorful and privileged existence among her many friends and relatives in her African community. It is not long however before Remi finds her comfortable life turned upside down, and she is forced to make the strange, unfamiliar journey to England where she is to receive her education. Bereft of friends and family Remi must learn to adapt to life in England which is far different from her home in Africa. Placed in the rigid British school system Remi struggles to be accepted by her teachers and fellow classmates who regard her as an exotic intruder. One of only a few Black students at her school Remi aspires to become so English that she will not be considered different from anyone else. Although Remi is successful in her efforts to transform herself into an English schoolgirl, the transformation is achieved at the expense of her cultural identity. Torn between her desire to fit in amongst English society, and her need to defend Africa's honor against the inaccurate information that she receives at school, Remi tries to find a place to belong. When after years of separation Remi is finally reunited with her friends and family from home, she begins to regain the self-confidence and pride in being African that she lost upon coming to England. Remi's experience of loneliness and isolation come to an end when she finds friendship and a sense of belonging in the multicultural community of International students, including other Africans, that she becomes part of. After enduring many hardships during her stay in England Remi feels strengthened by her ability to overcome adversity and looks forward to returning to her home in Africa.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

The theme of *Yoruba Girl Dancing* is intimately concerned with the need to preserve one's cultural identity in a world that does not value that identity and which seeks to undermine it. When Remi leaves her native country to go to school in England she leaves behind the cultural life that has informed

her understanding of the world. On the boat to England Remi experiences her first of many encounters with white people who do not understand her cultural identity, and who try to replace it with something else. When Miss Smith, one of the ship's passengers calls her a savage, Remi is not angry but puzzled as she has no idea what the word means. Despite her innocence of the term, however, she is quick to learn that Miss Smith has a low opinion of her. Assuming that because Remi is African she must have an inferior education, Miss Smith tells her that she will have to work very hard to keep up with her smarter English classmates. Although Remi feels sure that Miss Smith, who has never been to her country is wrong, she is powerless to convince her of this.

When Remi finally arrives in England she is perplexed by how differently people react to her appearance. Unused to being stared at Remi cannot imagine what people find so unusual about her. Her confusion is further increased when her step-grandmother, Bigmama, asks Remi to call her Aunty instead of Bigmama. Remi doesn't understand Bigmama when she tries to explain to her that people would think it odd that they were related because she is white and Remi is Black. Remi cannot make sense of the fact that color means something different in England than it does in Africa. All of Remi's early experiences in England reinforce her feelings of strangeness and confusion. Her grandmother's unwillingness to acknowledge Remi as her grandchild and the bus driver's rude inquiry "is it a boy or a girl" (Bedford, 1991, p. 65) make her feel less than human. Moreover, her Aunt Betty's reluctance to take her in for the school holidays because she fears what people will think about her having a "darkie kid in the house" convince her that something is wrong with the people in England (p. 71).

The new habits and customs that Remi encounters in England are so different from what she is used to that she finds herself in a constant state of bewilderment. When Remi dons her new "nigger brown" school uniform she begins to cry because she is frightened by her strange appearance (p. 66). Remi's spirits do not improve when she finally arrives at Chilcott Manor. Intimidated by the cold formality of her new school Remi wonders how she will be able to live within its walls. Her apprehensions about Chilcott Manor are transformed into ones of terror when she is forced to sleep in a room by herself for the first time in her life. Used to sharing a bed with brothers, sisters, and cousins, Remi finds the prospect of sleeping alone terrifying. The school matron, completely unsympathetic to Remi's feelings of

homesickness is unable to provide her with any comfort. Deprived of everything that was safe and familiar in her home culture Remi must learn to cope with her new surroundings on her own.

The differences between her school at home and Chilcott Manor are made even more apparent when she meets her new classmates. Remi is surprised to discover that the other girls do not look like the princesses from her fairy tale books, but all seem to resemble one another. Remi's new classmates are equally surprised by her strange appearance and are curious about where she came from. Remi's early encounters with the other girls at Chilcott Manor provide insight into the fear and misunderstanding that often arise as the result of cultural differences. When Remi's classmates refer to her home as "darkest Africa" Remi is puzzled by their use of the term because it doesn't describe where she comes from at all (p. 87). Unused to being under so much scrutiny Remi becomes quiet and withdrawn, unlike her usual outgoing self.

The other students' ignorance about Africa, and about what it means to be a person of color make Remi a target for their cruelty. When one of the girls spreads the rumor that the black on Remi's skin rubs off, many of Remi's classmates become afraid of her. Unable to cure the girls of their irrational fear by herself, Remi must endure being ostracized until the French teacher explains to her classmates that the black on Remi's skin "absolutely does not come off" (p. 92).

Having overcome her first hurdle with her new classmates Remi once again becomes the center of much interest and curiosity. Unable to sustain the other girls' interest in her with tales from her real life Remi begins to make up stories about Africa to entertain her new friends. As Remi begins to make up more incredible stories about her life in the African wild, she moves farther and farther away from her own understanding of what it means to be African. Drawing on the Tarzan legends and other stereotypical representations of African life, Remi tells her friends what she thinks they want to hear rather than what she knows to be the truth. Remi allows herself to be drawn even further into an African fantasy world when she goes to her uncle Theo's and Aunt Betty's for the holidays. When Betty's son Gerald invites her to be a part of his Tarzan games she agrees. Although Gerald's friends are reluctant to let Remi join their gang because she is a darkie, Gerald convinces them by pointing out that it will add to the gang's authenticity to have a "genuine African savage" amongst them (p. 90). In her desire to be accepted Remi agrees to participate in Gerald's games even though she questions the believability of the Tarzan myth. When Remi

returns to school after the holidays she uses her new stock of Tarzan material to make her tales of life in Africa even more colorful.

Although Remi becomes popular for the “glamour and excitement” of her Nigerian tales (p. 94) Remi’s stories do not go unchallenged for long. Estelle Matthews, the only other girl to have come to Chilcott Manor from Africa, accuses her of lying about her home in Lagos. Ironically, it is the true parts of Remi’s stories that Estelle objects to the most. Because in Estelle’s country Africans are employed only as servants she cannot believe that Remi’s father is a master who has Europeans working for him. To settle the matter the two girls enter into a fist-fight which must be broken up by the school mistress. The argument between Remi and Estelle dispels the myth that all Africans are alike. As Remi and Estelle’s different lifestyles reveal, many cultural differences exist between the diverse groups of people who live in Africa. The novel points out that because Estelle and Remi are both Black does not mean that they feel a sense of shared cultural heritage.

As time passes at Chilcott Manor Remi begins to look and sound more and more English. However, although Remi has managed to overcome many obstacles at her new school her success is not without some personal cost to herself:

It seemed as if the little pot of African clay, which had been sent bobbing thousands of miles across the ocean, had survived against all the odds intact; the brown glaze was as shiny as before. Only the hairline crack running from top to bottom on the inside betrayed that it was not the same as it was and would never be again (p. 97).

Although Remi is unchanged in her appearance, she possesses a new awareness of what it means to be a darkie. The six-year old’s naivete has been replaced by a young woman’s certainty that her dark skin and African heritage set her apart from the other girls at school. Remi’s maturation has also raised her awareness about the kinds of misinformation about Africa that is taught in her classes. Feeling the need to protect the “honor of Africa” Remi objects to Africans being depicted as ignorant savages in need of European guidance (p. 123). Remi’s objections during lessons do not go unnoticed by her teachers who frequently punish her for her “cheeky contradictions” (p. 99). Remi is unable to ignore the negative comments she hears about Africans in her classes because she feels that they are a direct insult to her and

her family. By standing up for her country Remi is protecting her cultural identity from becoming completely assimilated to the English culture of which she is now also a part.

Remi's desire to feel connected to her home in Africa, however, becomes more difficult the longer she goes without seeing her family. The more holidays that go by without her father asking her to go home the more Remi feels as though she must have done something wrong to be deserted in such a way. Feeling as though she is no longer wanted at home Remi tries even harder to be accepted by English society. By the time Remi's father does finally come to visit she has changed so much that her father is barely able to recognize her. When he hears Remi greet him in her "best English" he exclaims: "She has become an Englishwoman" (p. 131). Watching Remi perform the role of hostess during their first meal together in many years, Remi's father is astounded by her English manners and formal behavior towards him. Although Remi's father wanted his daughter to receive an English education even he is unprepared for how complete Remi's transformation has been.

Despite the fact that Remi now feels herself to be no different from any other schoolgirl, she is forced to realize that not everyone will accept her as being English. During a school trip to Germany Remi is horrified to discover how shocked the people of Hessich-Neustadt are by her appearance. Once more Remi is made uncomfortable by being singled out for looking different from everyone else. Remi's reaction to her reception in Germany reveals how out of touch she has become from her African Heritage. When one of the teachers at the German school asks her to tell them about Africa Remi replies: "why me? I don't know anything about Africa. Can't they see I'm from England like everyone else" (p. 162). Instead of telling the truth about her family in Lagos Remi uses material from an article she read in *National Geographic* to describe her life. Remi's need to make up stories about her family shows how much Remi has come to feel a stranger to her own culture. Moreover, the German teacher's insistence that Remi tell the other students about Africa shows her unwillingness to accept Remi as English. Remi's skin color automatically sets her apart no matter how well versed in English ways she has become. When the mayor wants to have his picture taken with Remi because she is the first African to visit the town, Remi resents the honor because it makes her feel as though she is being treated like a freak.

Remi's feelings about her cultural identity and her place in English society are revealed in a telling conversation with a friend when Remi compares herself to Othello:

Othello was destroyed, I declared, because his marrying Desdemona was seen as an attempt to become a Venetian, and the Venetians could not tolerate this in a black man. It has become increasingly obvious to me that if I do the same thing in trying to become one of you, I am likely to receive the same treatment. All this time I've been living in a fool's paradise and now I don't know who I am (p. 173).

Remi's reflections on her identity show her awareness that although she has been given an English education and has grown up thinking of herself as an English woman she will never be fully accepted as English because she is Black. This realization creates a conflict inside of Remi because she does not know who she is or where she belongs. Although she is reminded time and time again of the differences between her and the other girls at school, Remi also feels different from her family who make up such a small part of her life in England. Caught between two cultural worlds Remi's self-discovery begins by her learning who she is not.

Remi's ability to regain her cultural identity comes from learning to love and appreciate her differences and from being accepted by others who share her cultural heritage. *Yoruba Girl Dancing's* treatment of the theme of cultural identity is influenced by the prevailing cultural attitudes and the formation of social relationships. Remi's feelings of conflict over being caught between two cultural worlds and not knowing who she is are resolved when she discovers a supportive community of friends and relatives who have undergone many of the same experiences, and who share a common cultural heritage. The process of growth and maturation that Remi undergoes in the novel teaches her that she cannot force herself to shed her cultural identity because it is too much a part of her. The strength and confidence that Remi finds at the end of *Yoruba Girl Dancing* fulfils the novel's thematic purpose: to show that the discovery of one's cultural identity is a painful process that requires the individual to show strength and courage in the face of both ethnocentrism and injustice.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

Yoruba Girl Dancing devotes a great deal of attention to the sociocultural and historical concerns affecting Africans who choose to live abroad in a largely white, Eurocentric culture. The novel sensitively explores the challenges facing Remi and her family as they move between two cultural worlds.

The story begins in Nigeria in the town of Lagos where Remi and her family live together in a European style mansion filled with servants. Remi's grandfather is a wealthy palm oil trader who supports the entire household. Descended from African royalty on her father's side Remi's life is governed by many rules and customs. As the eldest grandchild she is sent to live with her grandparents who raise her in the Yoruba culture which incorporates a blend of African and European traditions. Remi's privileged existence is unlike that of many of the other inhabitants of Lagos because her family's wealth and education set them apart from the common people. Despite Remi's family's wealth and status in Lagos slavery has cast its dark shadow on Remi's family history. When Remi asks her grandfather if they used to be slaves he tells her: "Yes in America, but that was a long time ago. The important thing for you to remember is that our family came back" (p. 3). Remi's grandfather takes great pride in the fact that their family returned to Africa and built a life there. Although the enslavement of Africans is an inescapable part of the past, Remi's grandfather is quick to point out that their history as slaves in no way overshadows the honor and success that their family has won as free people. Remi's family's sense of their African heritage is the source of their family pride and cultural identity.

Although Yoruba culture is a patriarchal one education for women is encouraged, and Remi's family is made up of successful professional women. Once the members of Remi's family reach school age it is traditional for them to go to England for their education. Drawing on African social history the novel explains how members of the Nigerian upper class believed that it was imperative for their children to receive an education, so that when their country was finally given independence it would be prepared with a generation of young people who possessed the skills and experience necessary for running a country. When Remi finds out that her father has decided that it is her turn to go to England she is horrified by the prospect of leaving behind her friends and family. Having grown up in the bosom of a close African community Remi is unable to imagine what life will be like in England. The only English person that Remi has met is her step-grandmother Bigmama, who married her mother's father, much to the dismay of his African family. Although Remi knows that Bigmama looks different from her she does not understand what her Grandma means when she says that Bigmama will never be completely accepted by the family because she is a foreigner and white. Because Remi has no concept of what the words white and black mean in the world outside her door, she does not understand why something like skin color should matter.

Having been brought up in a nurturing African community Remi has not had to endure the pain of racial injustice or discrimination.

Remi's innocence about the nature of prejudice does not last very long. Once she arrives at her new school in England Remi begins to experience what it feels like to be one of the few Black people in a largely white world. Told from Remi's point of view as she matures from a child to a young woman *Yoruba Girl Dancing* offers many insights into the nature of prejudice. The novel effectively captures the socio-cultural environment of Chilcott Manor where ethnocentric attitudes prevail. The ignorance that is shown by many of Remi's teachers about Africa and about the people who live there causes Remi to become the victim of stereotyping. The singing mistress is astounded when she discovers that Remi is tone deaf. An admirer of the Black American singer Paul Robeson, the singing mistress tells Remi that she assumed Remi would have a beautiful singing voice like "all of her people" (p.125). Remi receives similar treatment from her English teacher Mr. Lawson, who assumes that Remi's abilities in English will be inferior to those of the rest of the class because she has a different cultural heritage. Remi doesn't understand her teacher's underestimation of her abilities because she has always received the highest grades in English. When Remi comes first in the class exams she is puzzled by the fact that Mr. Lawson seems to be angry at her. Mr. Lawson's attitude towards Remi reveals his need to see her as culturally disadvantaged. He is disconcerted by Remi's success in his class because it challenges his expectations about what people from different cultures are capable of. Remi's struggle to prove her abilities does not end with Mr. Lawson: she is denied a place at her college of choice when she becomes angered at her interviewers' assumption that her command of the English language is inferior because she was born in Africa.

Other examples of the negative stereotypes that exist in English culture are the way the Black natives are portrayed in Gerald's Tarzan games. When Remi questions why the natives always disgrace themselves by being accident prone, running away from danger, and eventually getting eaten by the animals, one of Gerald's friends tell her its because "white people have got more brains" (p. 117). Although Remi knows that this is the wrong explanation it is the one that she is constantly running up against in her life at school. Remi encounters other African stereotypes during her stay with her father's missionary friends, the Braithwaites, who feel the need to warn Remi and her sister about the evils of

alcohol because as Africans they are “particularly susceptible” (p. 153). The novel’s exploration of Remi’s relationships with her teachers and guardians points out the negative effects that stereotypes have on children’s self esteem. Remi’s resistance of others’ attempts to stereotype her reveals her strength and determination to succeed in a world that would use her African heritage as an excuse to deny her opportunities.

Another socio-cultural concern explored in the novel is the nature of Remi’s relationship with her family and how it is affected by her move to England. Although Remi has lived apart from her father for most of her life she remains under the power of his authority. As a woman Remi does not have the freedom to make decisions about her future, and must comply with her father’s wish that she pursue a career in law or medicine. In addition to exploring the feelings of powerlessness that come from experiencing life as a minority, the novel points out the unequal power relationships that exist in patriarchal cultures.

The differences between Remi’s attitude towards life in England and that of her father are apparent when Remi tries to tell her father about the difficulties she has had to endure since coming to England. Comparing Remi’s privileged situation to that of someone growing up facing insuperable odds in America or in the Caribbean, Remi’s father refuses to hear her complaints, telling her how lucky she is. He responds to Remi’s anger over being misjudged by white people by telling her that as long as she knows that her intelligence is equal to that of those around her she should not care what the English think of her. Remi is constantly amazed that her father seems oblivious to the stares that their family attracts on the street. In contrast to Remi’s attempts to adapt to English ways, Remi’s father behaves the same way in London as he did in Lagos. Despite the differences in their age and situations the attitude of Remi’s father serves to reinforce the importance of believing in oneself and refusing to let others take your self-confidence away from you.

One of the major issues facing people of dual cultural identity in *Yoruba Girl Dancing* is how in mainstream society greater importance is attributed to cultural assimilation than to preserving cultural identity. Thrust onto a strange, new life in a foreign country Remi must learn to survive in the new environment she finds herself in as best she can. For Remi this means becoming as English as possible. Remi’s transformation into an English young lady is assisted by elocution lessons intended to eliminate her

“towering Nigerian vowels” (p. 101). Remi’s lessons at Chilcott Manor also teach her to be ashamed of her Uncle Reg and Aunt Betty’s low class South London accent. The education that Remi receives at Chilcott Manor has the negative effect of distancing her not only from her African heritage, but from her substitute family in England as well. As Remi’s cultural assimilation becomes more complete, Remi finds herself increasingly alienated from the people who care about her the most.

Remi’s efforts to become like any other English girl cause her to lose sight of the things that are most important to her, including her pride in her cultural heritage. In her determination to be regarded as the same as everybody else, Remi resolves to give up trying to defend Africa against the inaccurate and racist things that are said about it by some of the teachers at her school. Remi’s decision to trade in her “boxing gloves” for “aeroplane camouflage” is symbolic of her growing conviction that it is easier to be like everyone else than it is to be different and to stand up for what you believe in (p. 123). However, the frustration that Remi feels from listening to her teacher’s racist comments finally overwhelms her and she challenges Miss Valentine’s statement that Africans are “savages”. The cruel treatment that Remi receives for her outburst shows that speaking out against injustice requires much more strength and courage than following the crowd.

One of the greatest difficulties that Remi faces in her struggle to be accepted by English society is her different appearance. Frequently the only Black face amongst so many white ones Remi often feels like a freak. Because her appearance cannot conform to the very precise standards set for English beauty Remi is convinced that she is unattractive. Although Remi realizes that it is impossible for her to be petite, blonde, and curvy like Debby Reynolds, she feels that she has no other role models to compare herself to. Surrounded by white people and images of white culture Remi finds it difficult to maintain her confidence when she is always singled out for being different. Although Remi wants to feel that she belongs she is given only unsatisfactory reassurances of her Englishness by her cousin Gerald, who tells her that because she has adopted so many English ways she can no longer be considered a savage.

Remi is provided with a rare opportunity to see other non-white faces when she stays with some missionary friends of her father’s during one of her school holidays. When Remi and her sister are taken by their hosts to a Baptist church they are astonished to see Jamaicans singing and dancing during the service. Remi is delighted by the Jamaicans’ exuberance and feels a sense of kinship with them because

their love of music and dancing reminds her of home. However, when Remi asks one of the women if Jamaica is like Africa, the woman tells her: "The West Indies is not like Africa at all. It's just like England in Jamaica" (p. 150). Hurt by the woman's reaction to her question Remi feels rejected by yet another culture, and is disappointed that her feeling of kinship with the Jamaicans was not reciprocated. Remi's encounter with the Jamaicans reveals how much pressure is placed on people from different ethnic and racial groups to assimilate to English culture. The Jamaican woman's unwillingness to admit that life in the West Indies is different from life in England shows how English culture is often used as the measuring stick of civilization that non-white cultures must be measured against.

Despite all of the efforts of Remi's teachers and guardians to transform her into an English girl, Remi's ties to her cultural identity prove stronger than their desire to instruct and improve her. Although Remi and her sister enjoy all of the fun and exuberance they encounter at the Baptist church, Remi remains unconvinced that God exists anywhere but "up in the rafters of Lagos Cathedral, held fast by Lagos society, which had exclusive rights over him" (p. 147). Once Remi is restored to the bosom of her family she begins to regain her self-confidence by re-establishing her ties with her cultural heritage. In the company of friends and relatives who share a common cultural identity Remi no longer feels the need to conform to English culture or to pretend to be someone she's not. After years of being on the outside looking in Remi is finally able to experience the thrill of belonging and to enjoy being herself. The novel achieves its thematic purpose by showing the reader that cultural assimilation should not be achieved at the expense of cultural identity. Remi's growth and maturation throughout the novel brings her a greater understanding of who she is and a renewed pride in her cultural heritage.

The first person narration in *Yoruba Girl Dancing* is remarkable for its ability to draw the reader into Remi's world and allow him or her to experience Remi's maturation process with her. The reader first sees the world of the novel through Remi's eyes as a six-year old child, and continues to share in her perceptions of the people and situations around her as her point of view gradually widens and matures. Through Remi's descriptions the reader is privy to an insider's view of African culture and experience. He or she is invited to share in the excitement of Yoruba celebrations and to empathize with Remi's fear and uncertainty when she leaves her friends and family behind to pursue her education in England. Remi's life at Chilcott Manor is described in a way that makes the reader feel as though he or she were there with her.

sleeping between cold sheets in a dark, unfamiliar room without the comfort or solace of home. Remi's experience of being a stranger in a strange land is made poignant by her sensitive narration of events and by her descriptions of her relationships with her family in Africa, her friends at school, and the substitute family that she creates in England. In *Yoruba Girl Dancing* the reader is never on the outside looking in, but instead shares with Remi her journey of self-discovery as she matures from an naive six-year old to a knowing young woman.

*Asian American**Saying Goodbye*Summary

Saying Goodbye tells the story of Ellen Sung, an eighteen-year old Korean girl who is beginning her freshman year at Harvard. Saddened by the prospect of leaving behind her high-school friends and having to start over in a new city, Ellen arrives at Harvard feeling lost and unsure. Because she has spent most of her life in the small, largely white town of Arkin, Minnesota, Ellen is surprised to encounter so many non-white faces. No longer the only Asian American at her school Ellen finds herself being exposed to Korean language and culture for the first time. Ellen's adjustment to her new surroundings is made easier by the close friendships she develops with her roommate Leecia, and a boy named Jae Chun that she meets in her tae kwan do class. Despite her fears about fitting in at Harvard and being able to get good grades Ellen finds herself enjoying the freedom of being away from home. For the first time in her life Ellen is able to pursue her own interests without fear of her parents' disapproval. She also finds herself learning more about her cultural heritage from Jae Chun who begins to teach her the Korean language. However, Ellen's new-found happiness at Harvard is soon threatened by an unexpected racial controversy. When Leecia's African American Alliance Group invites a Black rap star known for his negative lyrics about Koreans to campus, Ellen finds herself torn between her friendship with Leecia and her need to stand up for what she believes in. Ellen's decision to take part in a Korean students' protest leads to an ugly confrontation with Leecia that results in the loss of their friendship. Although Ellen accepts that she did the right thing in standing up for her beliefs she realizes how much pain her choices have caused her. The end of Ellen's freshman year leaves her both wiser and sadder about the kinds of situations that demand that she make difficult choices.

AnalysisDescription of thematic content.

In *Saying Goodbye* Ellen's discovery of her cultural identity and her personal growth as an individual are seen to be mutually influencing one another. The novel's presentation of the theme of

cultural identity is realistic in that it addresses issues important to Ellen's development as a young woman as well as her growing awareness of her Korean heritage. Ellen's experiences throughout the novel reflect both typical adolescent concerns and those that are unique to people of color.

About to embark on her freshman year at Harvard University Ellen feels unsure of her ability to fit in at her new school. Having lived her entire life in the small town of Arkin, Minnesota Ellen is intimidated by the prospect of leaving behind the safe environment of familiar friends and family to attend a university so far from home. Raised in a strict environment where she was pressured to succeed academically, Ellen fears that she will not be able to make her parents proud of her at Harvard.

When Ellen arrives on campus she is overwhelmed by the idea of living on her own. Used to being the only non-white face in her school Ellen is surprised when she meets her roommate Leecia who is African American. Ellen is further taken aback when Leecia tells her that she can't believe that the university would put an Asian American woman and an African American woman in the same room: "You'd think they'd want to use us to spice up the diversity of some of the other housing groups" (Lee, 1990, p. 8). Leecia's explanation of how the concept of multiculturalism has affected the housing situation at Harvard makes Ellen realize how different university is from her high-school back home. No longer a member of the only Asian family in Arkin, Minnesota, Ellen finds herself part of a multicultural community for the first time.

At Harvard Ellen discovers there is a cultural dimension to academics that she never knew existed. Leecia's decision to take courses that deal with African American issues makes Ellen realize how unconnected she is from her Korean heritage. When Leecia encourages her to take Asian American Literature Ellen feels guilty that she prefers reading mainstream literature to the literature of her own culture. Similarly, when Ellen finds herself surrounded by other Asian students in her math and science classes she feels disappointed that her new environment does not seem to have much of an effect on her. Although Ellen is relieved to no longer stick out, she does not feel magically connected to the other Asian students the way thought she would when she was the only Asian in her high-school. Ellen's reflections on her cultural identity inform the reader that just because someone is born into a particular culture does not mean that he or she shares with other members of that group a common cultural identity. When Ellen comes to Harvard she realizes that she has had vastly different experiences from many of the other Korean

students that she encounters. Although Ellen is interested in learning more about her cultural background she is not willing to sacrifice her own interests to embrace what people like Leecia feel is her cultural heritage. Ellen's desire to feel connected to her cultural identity, and at the same time to preserve her individuality, shows a dualistic concern for her personal sense of self as well as her need to feel that she belongs to her culture.

Ellen's lack of opportunities to experience Korean culture has left her feeling estranged from her cultural identity. Ellen's feeling like an outsider insightfully points out the power of language to enable the members of a cultural group to communicate with one another. When Ellen hears a group of students speaking Korean she wonders what it would be like to feel a sense of belonging to her cultural heritage. Ellen's inability to understand the Korean language makes her feel as though she cannot claim membership in her cultural group.

Despite the fact that she has not grown up in a Korean environment, however, Ellen finds herself becoming interested in Korean cultural activities. When Ellen accompanies Leecia to the Harvard activity fair she is overwhelmed by how many teams, clubs, and organizations there are to choose from. Leecia's decision to sign up for the African American Student Alliance sparks Ellen's curiosity about her own culture, and she decides to sign up with the school's tae kwon do club. Ellen's experience of gradually opening up to her cultural identity shows the multicultural atmosphere at Harvard exercising an influence on her. Because of the support and encouragement she receives from Leecia and the Korean students she meets at tae kwon do, Ellen feels more confident about becoming involved in cultural activities.

Ellen's relationship with Leecia provides insight into the different ways that people of color experience racial injustice. When Leecia expresses her need to be around other people of color so that she can escape from the "white elitism" (p. 44) that permeates Harvard, Ellen realizes that she never had the opportunity to escape the feeling of being the only Asian around until she came to university. Leecia's ability to sympathize with Ellen's experience of being called racist names in high school makes her think about how much those incidents affected the way she felt about being Asian. When Leecia tells Ellen about the time a car full of white boys drove past her holding up a sign that said "nigger", Ellen realizes how much they have in common as women of color. Despite the closeness of Leecia and Ellen's friendship tensions arise between the two girls when Leecia's African American Alliance group invites a controversial

rap star, Professor T, to campus. Ellen finds herself in the middle of a conflict between Leecia's African American Alliance group, who view Professor T's music as an expression of the concerns of the African American community, and her Korean friends who believe Professor T promotes racism against Koreans. Although Ellen has never considered herself as part of a cohesive Korean American group she feels pressure from both sides to become involved in the debate surrounding Professor T. When Ellen hears the lyrics to Professor T's song about Koreans she knows that she wants to join the Korean students' protest even though it may harm her friendship with Leecia. However, although Ellen shares the other Korean students' disgust for Professor T's music she is confused by the protest leader's rhetoric about what they are demonstrating for. Ellen wonders whether her reasons for joining the protest are the same as everyone else's. The leader's ambition to start a nation wide boycott of Professor T and his record company strikes her as something different from her desire to eliminate hatred and to find a common ground with other people of color. Ellen's description of the Professor T protest reveals the complex nature of issues like censorship and racism, and points out how people on both sides of a conflict can get carried away by the intensity of their emotions.

During the demonstration Ellen feels a rush of solidarity with the assembled Koreans. Despite her reservations about identifying herself as Korean American Ellen feels good that she is fighting for what she believes in. However, when Ellen finds herself confronting Leecia she realizes how much her decision to join the protest has cost her. Ellen and Leecia find themselves on opposing sides of the Professor T conflict because they view the situation through different cultural lenses. Neither one can understand the other's position. Each girls' frustration over not being able to make the other person understand her point of view causes them to lose sight of their friendship. The confrontation between Ellen and Leecia ends with Ellen calling Leecia a racist.

When the protest is over Ellen is too saddened by the loss of her friendship with Leecia to feel triumphant that Professor T did not come to campus. Despite her misery, Ellen realizes that as much as she would like to restore her relationship with Leecia to the way it was before the protest she cannot fix the things that caused the rift in their friendship because they are too complex to be worked out. In spite of Ellen and Leecia's close feelings for one another cultural ties and loyalties come between them. The

conflict with Professor T does not allow them to separate their friendship with one another from the war between their cultural groups.

The fact that *Saying Goodbye* does not attempt to provide a neat resolution of the conflicts raised in the novel shows its commitment to presenting complex issues in as realistic a way as possible. For Ellen there are no easy answers. By the end of the novel she has experienced what it is like to be thrown into situations that demand that she make difficult choices. Although Ellen feels a greater sense of connection to her cultural heritage, she has also learned about the pain that comes with standing up for what you believe in.

The portrayal of Ellen in *Saying Goodbye* is believable because it reveals the many different dimensions of a young woman's personality, not just those that reflect her experiences as a minority. A large part of Ellen's self-awareness comes from her relationship with her high-school friend Jesse. When Ellen goes home for the Christmas holidays she is surprised and saddened when Jesse tells her about her decision to get married instead of going to college. Ellen feels guilty that she had the opportunity to go away to school while Jesse had to stay in Arkin and take care of her alcoholic father. When Ellen thinks back to her high-school days, and all of the time she spent with Jesse, Ellen is struck by how much she has changed since then. Ellen's experience of being away from home has given her greater confidence as well as an awareness of what it means to have to rely on herself. However, although Ellen realizes that going away to school has made her a stronger person, she is also aware of how much more difficult life has become. The challenges that Ellen and Jesse are facing as young women are part of a more mature realm of experience than the kinds of problems that they faced in high-school.

Saying Goodbye is notable for its naturalistic treatment of the complex issues surrounding a young woman's growth and maturation. The novel's exploration of the theme of cultural identity shows that there is both joy and sadness in the process of self-discovery. Although the novel invites the reader to rejoice in Ellen's emerging confidence as she learns to draw strength from her cultural heritage, *Saying Goodbye* also reveals how Ellen's self-discovery is accompanied by the sorrow that comes with understanding that some tests are too great for even the strongest relationships. The reader is able to empathize with Ellen's pain over losing the friendship of the two people who are most important to her. In showing the reader how Ellen's personal growth and the development of her cultural awareness reciprocally influence one another,

Saying Goodbye presents a multifaceted view of the theme of cultural identity. In addition to addressing issues important to people of dual cultural identity, the novel sensitively explores concerns relevant to young women, regardless of cultural background, who are experiencing life away from home for the first time.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

Ellen Sung's journey of self-discovery in *Saying Goodbye* is profoundly influenced by the socio-cultural and historical concerns that affect Ellen's relationships with her friends and family. The nature of Ellen's relationships with the important people in her life and her feelings about her cultural identity are transformed by the different sociocultural milieu that she encounters at Harvard.

Ellen's relationship with her sister at the beginning of the novel reveals Ellen's need to defend the personal desires that do not meet with her family's approval. Ellen's interest in writing is considered a waste of time by her sister Michelle, who thinks that Ellen should spend all of her energies on getting good grades so that she can become a doctor like their father. Ellen's family's desire that she succeed at Harvard puts a great deal of pressure on Ellen who feels that in order to please her family she must always do what they tell her. Michelle's conviction that using terms like Asian American is "dumb" leaves Ellen feeling unsure of how to think about, or attempt to describe, her cultural background to herself or to others. When Ellen goes away to school however, she finds herself surrounded by people who introduce her to new ways of seeing her cultural identity that are very different from those she learned from her parents. Ellen's feelings about being Korean are particularly influenced by her relationship with Jae Chun who comes from a large Korean community in L.A. When Jae tells her how his parents' grocery store was destroyed during the L.A. riots, Ellen realizes how different her life has been from people like Jae's. Remembering her father comparing their family to the new Korean immigrants coming to America, Ellen is ashamed that she believed her father when he said that their educated family was nothing like the Korean families who ran grocery stores. The more Ellen learns about Jae and his family, however, the more she feels that her father is wrong. Ellen's relationship with Jae helps her to understand the kinds of limitations that are put on Korean immigrants in America. Although Jae's parents were educated professionals in Korea, when they came to America one of the only jobs open to them was working in a grocery where they had to struggle to

make enough money to survive. Despite the differences in their social backgrounds Ellen feels that she and Jae share a special bond, one that is made even stronger by their shared cultural heritage. In the eyes of Ellen's parents, however, class differences cut through cultural ties. Although Ellen hoped her parents would be happy that she was dating a Korean boy, she feels her parents' disapproval of Jae because he is a grocer's son. Ellen's parents' reaction to Jae reveals how material considerations such as wealth and status can be forces of division within a particular cultural group. The fact that Jae is Korean is not enough for Ellen's parents to overlook the differences in their social backgrounds.

Ellen's attitude towards other Koreans differs from that of her parents in that she believes that regardless of their different backgrounds, she and many of the other Korean students at Harvard have many things in common. By pointing out the differences between Ellen's experience of being Korean American in a small Minnesota town, and Jae's experience as a Korean living in a big city, *Saying Goodbye* dispels the myth that people from the same racial or ethnic group are alike in every respect. The novel's depiction of different types of Korean American experiences reinforces the importance of recognizing the infinite variations that exist within each cultural group.

Ellen's relationship with her roommate Leecia is another way in which *Saying Goodbye* explores several important socio-cultural concerns. As young women of color Ellen and Leecia have many things in common, particularly their experiences of racism. When Ellen tells Leecia about the girl who called her racist names and finally attacked her with a broken bottle, Leecia is able to empathize with Ellen's feelings because she has suffered similar treatment. However, despite all that they share in common there are important differences between the ways that each girl experiences discrimination. During a trip to the local deli Leecia is offended when the Korean storekeeper treats her like a thief because she is Black. When Ellen realizes what is going on she is both surprised and angered by the unjustness of the storekeeper's behavior. Ellen points out: "No one suspects all whites when a white person commits a crime, for heaven's sake" (p. 62). However, although Ellen's sympathies are with Leecia she is aware of how some Koreans, including her father, feel about African Americans. When Ellen hears her father say that Blacks are bad people who are jealous of hardworking Koreans, Ellen is both shocked and disappointed by her father's ignorance. Ellen's attempt to challenge her father's comment by telling him about Leecia who works harder than she does is unsuccessful because her father does not have enough real knowledge of African

Americans to allow him to see the injustice of his statement. Ellen's mother's comment that Leecia doesn't "sound black over the phone" makes Ellen realize that the only contact her parents have with Black people is through TV.

A lack of awareness about cultural differences occasionally leads to misunderstandings between the two girls. When Leecia tells Ellen that she thought all Koreans were rich because they dress so nice Ellen realizes how much cultural stereotypes prevent different racial and ethnic groups from truly seeing one another. The differences between Leecia's and Ellen's cultural backgrounds lead them to see certain issues differently. When Leecia and Ellen get into a conversation about the upcoming election they disagree about the right to vote. Leecia's decision to protest the absence of Black issues in the presidential campaign by not voting is incomprehensible to Ellen who feels that it is wrong to give up a democratic freedom. Ellen and Leecia's disagreement about the need to vote reveals the differences in their political attitudes. Although Ellen feels that she should respect Leecia's reasons for not voting, she wishes that she could change her friend's mind. *Saying Goodbye* draws on Leecia and Ellen's differences to show how an individual's attitudes, values, and assumptions are shaped in part by his or her socio-cultural background and experiences.

Saying Goodbye's exploration of Ellen's process of self-discovery also addresses the way cultural identity is sometimes sacrificed in the interest of increasing one's chances for success in the dominant culture. Ellen's relationship with her parents, and with Jae Chun, reveals the different attitudes towards language that exist within a particular culture. When Ellen meets Jae Chun he is surprised that she had never learned to speak Korean. He informs her that in the LA neighborhood that he came from everyone he knew had to go to Korean school on weekends. In contrast to the importance that Jae's community placed on preserving the Korean language, Ellen remembers her father scolding her mother for teaching her the Korean word for milk. In Ellen's house learning Korean was discouraged because her father was afraid that speaking Korean would accent his daughter's English. Ellen's parents' decision not to speak Korean at home shows the pressure felt by some members of nonmainstream groups to culturally assimilate. In the eyes of Ellen's parents it is necessary to sacrifice some aspects of one's cultural identity in order to be successful in mainstream society. From Ellen's perspective the ability to speak Korean is empowering because it gives her a greater sense of connection to her cultural heritage. The different attitudes towards

the relationship between language and culture portrayed in the novel provide insight into the motivations behind cultural assimilation, and into the affect that assimilation has on cultural identity.

Another issue important to people of dual cultural identity addressed in the novel is self-consciousness about appearance. Although *Saying Goodbye* features strong, confident characters, the novel also points out the ways in which they are sensitive about looking different. When Ellen asks Jae why he always wears a baseball cap he tells her that he thinks the cap makes him look less like an "Asian Geek" (p. 67). Surprised that someone as good-looking and as talented as Jae could feel insecure about the way he looks, Ellen tells him that no one who saw him doing Tae Kwon Do could possibly think he was a geek. Jae responds by pointing out that all of the famous martial arts stars are white, and how on screen, even big stars like Bruce Lee were regarded differently for being Asian: "When he appeared on screen he was emasculated. His non-Asian costars always got the women, and Bruce was always up in his room meditating or something" (p.68). Jae's comparison of the way Asian stars and non-Asian stars are depicted in films shows how standards of physical attractiveness and desirability usually reflect a white ideal. Ellen recalls how much she used to wish her dark eyes were round and blue like those of the other kids at her school. Jae's and Ellen's insecurities about their appearance suggest how much pressure there is in mainstream culture to conform to a particular standard of beauty. The lack of alternative non-white role models in society makes the experience of not being able to conform to white standards of attractiveness all the more alienating.

Told from Ellen's perspective *Saying Goodbye* draws the reader into Ellen's world and invites him or her to take part in her journey of self-discovery. The characterization of Ellen Sung is the novel's greatest strength; Ellen's sensitive reflections on her developing identity show a range of human responses and emotions that encourages readers to identify and empathize with her point of view. Ellen's character is made believable by the natural growth and change that she experiences as a result of the events in the novel. Ellen's desire to find fulfillment by pursuing the activities that interest her, and her commitment to standing up for what she believes in, shows her strength and courage. Although Ellen faces many difficult decisions during her freshman year at Harvard, the kinds of choices that she makes demonstrate her ability to solve problems on her own.

Cultural differences are also perceived by the reader through the main character's eyes. Ellen's relationship with Leecia allows the reader to appreciate both the similarities and differences in their cultural backgrounds, and to see how these things affect their understanding of one another. The dialogues between Ellen and Leecia and the nuances of their everyday life at university are realistically portrayed. *Saying Goodbye's* attention to detail creates a vivid sense of place for the reader to inhabit. The novel's descriptions of Harvard's busy social atmosphere and of the kinds of academic pressures experienced by freshman students are communicated to the reader in a way that makes him or her feel as though they are living through the same kinds of experiences as the main characters.

*Thief of Hearts*Summary

In *Thief of Hearts* the reader is introduced to 13 year old Stacy Palmer who seldom thinks about being Chinese American. Having grown up in the suburbs with her Chinese American mother, a successful psychologist, and her American father, Stacy has always considered herself to be just like everyone else. However, when Stacy's mother encourages her to befriend Hong Ch'un, a new girl at school who has just arrived from China, Stacy becomes uncomfortably aware that not everyone sees her as a regular American girl. When Hong Ch'un is accused of stealing and Stacy rises to her defence, Stacy's friends accuse her of siding with Hong Ch'un because she is part Chinese. Stacy's comfortable American identity is dealt a further blow when she overhears someone at school calling her a half-breed. Feeling lost and unsure about her place in the world Stacy yearns for some kind of reassurance that she belongs. Moreover, Stacy's troubles are increased when she discovers that Hong Ch'un has run away. Feeling partly responsible for Hong Ch'un's misery, Stacy, her mother, and great-grandmother (Tai-Pa) make the trip to San Francisco's Chinatown to find her. Walking the streets of San Francisco with her family turns into a journey of discovery for Stacy, who learns a great deal about her mother's life as a young girl growing up in Chinatown, and for the first time in her life Stacy begins to think about her cultural heritage and what it really means to be Chinese American. Stacy returns from Chinatown with a greater understanding of both her mother and her great-grandmother, and a renewed confidence in herself. Realizing that she misjudged Hong Ch'un the way some of her friends at school misjudged her, Stacy helps Hong Ch'un to clear her name by setting a trap for the person responsible for stealing her friends' possessions. With the help of Tai-Pa and her father, Stacy uncovers the identity of the real thief, and Hong Ch'un is no longer regarded as a criminal. The novel ends on a hopeful note with Stacy contemplating the possibility of making new worlds when the old worlds become too small. Reassured by her great-grandmother's unconditional love Stacy feels confident that even if she doesn't have a connection to a home like Chinatown, she can make her own home with all of the love she has for the people in her life.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

Thief of Hearts tells the story of Stacy Palmer's attempt to find a connection to her present cultural world by exploring her family's cultural ties to the past. Stacy's search for a place to belong acquaints her with many aspects of the Chinese experience that she had never thought about before. The discoveries she makes during a trip to Chinatown about her mother's and great-grandmother's histories allows her to see through the eyes of the heart; a vision that embraces cultural identities that are both Chinese and American.

At the beginning of the novel Stacy Palmer thinks of herself as an American and finds it hard to understand her mother's attempts to preserve her Chinese heritage. Stacy refers to her mother's gatherings with the other Cantonese speaking people in the community as her "Chinese love fests" (Yep, 1995. p. 125). Chinese culture also makes its presence felt in Stacy's home through her great-grandmother Tai-Pa, who is a captive audience of the Chinese cable channels on TV. Although Stacy loves her mother and Tai-Pa she realizes that she doesn't know much about how they feel about things. This is especially true when it comes to Stacy's mother's desire that she play host to Hong Ch'un and help her to adjust to American ways. Stacy cannot understand why her mother feels that it is so important that she try to make friends with a girl with whom she has nothing in common. When Stacy and Hong Ch'un meet each other for the first time they take an instant dislike to one another. Stacy is offended when she feels that Hong Ch'un is staring at the contrast between her pale skin and hair and her dark, Chinese eyes. Moreover, she resents having to defend herself against Hong Ch'un's dismay over her inability to speak Chinese. When Stacy tries to explain that she is American and not Chinese, Hong Ch'un responds, "but you lose so much" (p. 13). Before meeting Hong Ch'un Stacy had never thought much about her inability to speak Chinese. The difficulty that Stacy and Hong Ch'un experience while trying to communicate serves to heighten the tension between them.

Watching Hong Ch'un try to adjust to the new surroundings at school, Stacy senses how uncomfortable and out of place Hong Ch'un must feel. Stacy's attempts to sympathize with Hong Ch'un's situation, however, are misinterpreted by Hong Ch'un who thinks that Stacy is making fun of her. Stacy and Hong Ch'un's inability to communicate with one another shows how cultural differences can create

walls between people that lead to misunderstandings. Both girls are frustrated by the language barrier, and are resentful of one another for making the other feel as though her language skills are inadequate.

Stacy's feelings of resentment are increased when she is chosen by the principal to help Hong Ch'un learn her way around school just because she is Chinese. Because Stacy considers herself to be just like everyone else she is shocked to discover that others may not see her in the same way. Stacy blames Hong Ch'un for calling attention to the differences that no one at school seemed to notice before Hong Ch'un's arrival. Stacy's feelings toward Hong Ch'un are softened, however, when she tells Stacy about feeling lost in America. Hong Ch'un's revelation of her fear that if she adopts American ways she will lose the things that are the most important to her makes Stacy realize that what she took to be Hong Ch'un's dislike of America was really homesickness for her life in China. Hong Ch'un's admission that she feels overwhelmed by all of the differences between China and American helps Stacy to understand how easy it is to misjudge someone when you do not know what they are feeling.

Although Stacy is sympathetic to Hong Ch'un's struggle with her cultural identity she finds it hard to imagine what it would be like to be in her place. Confident about her place in the worlds of home and school Stacy is shocked when she finds herself having to convince friends that she is just like them. Stacy is both hurt and surprised by her friends' reaction when she defends Hong Ch'un against Karen's accusation that Hong Ch'un is the one responsible for the thefts taking place at school. Accused of standing up for Hong Ch'un just because they are both Chinese, Stacy feels different for the first time in her life. She finds herself torn between defending Hong Ch'un, whom she believes to be innocent, and siding with her friends to prove that she is no different from any of them. After the confrontation with her friends Stacy's cultural identity suffers a further injury when she overhears someone calling her a t'ung chung. Angry with Hong Ch'un for making her feel like an outsider, Stacy resolves to find out what the Chinese name means in English. When Stacy asks a group of Asian students what t'ung chung means one member of the group accuses her of acting like she is better than they are because she hangs out with the white kids. He tells her that she does not belong anywhere, not with the white students, and not with them. Stacy's discovery that t'ung chung means half breed makes her feel that he must be right. Stacy's falling out with her friends and with Hong Ch'un causes her to question who she is: "I had thought I had fit in as snugly as a center piece in a jigsaw puzzle, when all the time I had been pretending. I had thought I was on

top of the world when I had really been on the bottom” (p. 53). Stacy’s reflections on her identity reveal the feelings of pain and confusion that come from being caught between two cultural worlds. Convinced that her friends never thought of her as one of them, and rejected by the Chinese students at for being a half-breed, Stacy feels like an outsider in both cultures.

Stacy begins to regain her sense of belonging during a trip to Chinatown to find Hong Ch’un, who has run away. Spending time with her mother and Tai-pa helps Stacy to better understand her relationships with both women. When Stacy asks Tai-Pa to tell her a story she realizes that part of her great-grandmother’s unwillingness to do so is because Stacy rarely makes an effort to spend time with her anymore. Stacy remembers how much closer she felt to her grandmother when she was little and how much she enjoyed listening to her stories. Now that she has grown older she feels that she needs to convince her great-grandmother that she really wants to listen to her.

Tai-Pa’s story about the Thief of Hearts acts as a bridge between two cultural worlds, providing insight into the differences between American culture and Chinese culture. The novel’s interweaving of a traditional Chinese folktale with contemporary questions of love and identity creates a naturalistic exploration of the theme of cultural identity. Issues confronting people of mixed racial heritage are built into the framework of the narrative and into the folktale that exists within that narrative. The meaning behind the story of the Thief of Hearts shows two ways of looking at the human heart: the Chinese way, which believes that the heart rules the body and is the source of human thoughts, and the American way which sees the heart as the place where feelings come from and the mind as the center of thoughts. Stacy is intrigued by the idea of two cultures seeing something like the human heart so differently. She identifies with the Thief of Hearts, and compares his discovery that the world he once knew is forever lost to him to her own experience of feeling as though she is wandering alone with nowhere to call home. The sense of connection that Stacy feels with the ideas expressed in Tai-Pa’s story reveals her growing awareness of what it means to be Chinese American.

The events in Tai-Pa’s Thief of Hearts story also parallel Stacy’s family’s reaction to the changes they see in Chinatown. Just as the Thief of Hearts returned to his village to find that centuries had passed while he was gone, Stacy’s mother and Tai-Pa are shocked by how much Chinatown has changed since they used to live there. Seeing Tai-Pa’s distress over all of the changes in her old home makes Stacy

realize that she is not the only one who feels out of place and time. Listening to Tai-Pa talk about Chinatown and how it used to be makes Stacy wish that she could feel a connection to something as deeply as her mother and great-grandmother do. However, despite her uncertainty about cultural identity, Stacy feels reassured by her great-grandmother's conviction that when one world ends you find another, and when you have to you even make your own. When Stacy and her family find Hong Ch'un in an alley reading Chinese comic books Stacy realizes that Hong Ch'un shares her same desire to feel connected to her culture.

As a result of a trip to Chinatown with her mother and Tai-Pa Stacy feels closer to both her family and to her Chinese heritage. Learning about her mother's early life in Chinatown gives Stacy a new appreciation for how hard her mother has worked to secure a comfortable life for the family. In terms of her relationship with Tai-Pa Stacy feels reconnected to her great-grandmother's store of wisdom and experience. When she confides in Tai-Pa her fear that there is no longer a world for her to belong to, Stacy is strengthened and reassured by the knowledge that her great-grandmother loves her completely and unconditionally. Despite her uncertainty about the ways that other people might see her, Stacy knows that Tai-Pa is able to see beyond labels like Chinese and American. The events that take place during the course of the novel help Stacy to understand that things cannot be the same as they were before. Her experience of being called a half-breed has changed the way she sees herself. However, although Stacy's new found self-knowledge is accompanied by feelings of pain and confusion, it is also the source of a new strength and confidence. Stacy's awareness that she may never have the kind of connection to a place like Chinatown that her mother and Tai-Pa have is made easier by her certainty that she can make her own place to belong with all of the love she has from the old and new friends in her life. Despite all of the challenges Stacy knows may be ahead she feels confident of a good beginning.

The treatment of the theme of cultural identity in *Thief of Hearts* effectively fulfills its purpose to explore a young girl's efforts to connect her present with the past. The novel creates a space for both familial and cultural concerns, and makes meaningful connections between the two. The exploration of Stacy's relationship with her mother and great-grandmother in *Thief of Hearts* sensitively points out how different cultural experiences and points of view often lead to misunderstandings between younger and

older generations. By exploring the nature of these differences the novel achieves its purpose of helping the reader to understand the relationship between the present culture and the past.

Moreover, the novel's treatment of Stacy's relationship with her family does not abandon realism in favor of a happy ending. Although by the end of the story Stacy and her mother feel as though they understand one another better, Stacy realizes that there will still be stormy times ahead for them because they are so different. *Thief of Hearts* is successful in maintaining realism and believability because it seeks to create bridges between different cultural viewpoints rather than try to resolve differences altogether.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

Thief of Hearts focuses on Stacy's relationships with her mother and great-grandmother. A large part of Stacy's efforts to better understand the two most important women in her life is devoted to discovering, and trying to integrate, her Chinese heritage with her present American reality. However, uniting the past with the present proves a difficult task and the novel draws on Stacy's exploration of her cultural heritage to address some of the socio-cultural and historical concerns relevant to Chinese Americans. The relationships between Stacy, who has grown up thinking of herself as an American, and her mother and great-grandmother, who try to preserve their Chinese heritage, are troubled by a lack of communication. The beginning of the novel shows Stacy taking Tai-Pa for granted. Instead of seeing her great-grandmother as a person in her own right she regards her as the family caretaker whose sole preoccupation is looking after the needs of Stacy and her family.

Stacy finds it equally difficult to relate to her busy, professional mother. Although Stacy admires her mother's accomplishments she finds it difficult to talk to her mother without feeling as though she is being criticized. The misunderstandings that cloud Stacy's relationships with her Tai-Pa and her mother begin to subside once Stacy learns more about the past. Stacy is amazed to find out what a difficult childhood her mother had. When Stacy discovers that her mother once held down three part-time jobs in order to save money for college she realizes how much easier her life has been than her mother's. Learning about her mother's past helps Stacy to understand why her mother works so hard and why she is always pushing Stacy to apply herself more at school. Hearing Tai-Pa talk about her mother's childhood and how

special she was makes Stacy wish that someone believed in her as much as Tai-Pa believed in her mother when she was Stacy's age.

Stacy's relationships with her mother and Tai-Pa gradually become closer as all three women begin to realize that many of their misunderstandings arise from an inability to see things from the other person's perspective. Stacy is surprised to hear her mother reveal that she knows what it's like to feel like an outsider: "Sometimes," she confessed, "I feel like everybody's going to find out I'm just an imposter, and they'll ship me back to Chinatown" (p. 126). Finding out that her mother shares some of her feelings makes Stacy feel more comfortable about confiding her fears about being thought of as different to her mother.

One of the important socio-cultural concerns addressed in the novel is the kind of prejudice that people of mixed racial backgrounds encounter in society. In dealing with the issue of prejudice *Thief of Hearts* is careful to point out that negative attitudes towards people of mixed heritage exist in both white and non-white cultures. Because Stacy has never thought of her parent's relationship as anything out of the ordinary she is taken aback when she hears Tai-Pa's story about the time a waiter in Chinatown would not serve her parents because they were a mixed couple. Similarly, Stacy's protected upbringing leaves her unprepared to deal with the feelings of anger and confusion that she experiences when she is called a "half-breed". Stacy's parents' desire to protect her from prejudice is not enough to prevent her from hearing the racist remarks of some of the kids at her school. However, although Stacy is unable to forget the pain that being called a half-breed causes her she takes comfort in the fact that her grandmother's friends see with the heart's eyes; they like and respect her even though she is not completely Chinese.

Interwoven with the narrative in *Thief of Hearts* are several historical concerns that bear on the contemporary reality of Chinese Americans. Stacy's mother's and grandmother's reunion with Mr. Jeh during the trip to Chinatown reveals how much things have changed for Chinese immigrants to America. Mr. Jeh's descriptions of his sons' material success, and of their inability to understand their father's life in Chinatown shows some of the differences between old and new generations of Chinese Americans. Mr. Jeh's attempt to explain the past to his sons points out that the achievement of wealth and status is now possible for Chinese people in a way that it wasn't before: "And I tell them they grow up in China, where everyone is Chinese. They think it always okay here. Now you live where you want and do what you like.

But not back in the old days. Then you have to be very careful” (p. 117). Referring to the fair housing laws, Mr. Jeh tells Stacy how this legislation changed life for Chinese immigrants. They were finally allowed to move out of Chinatown and establish Chinese communities in new places. For the people who chose to remain in Chinatown, however, high rents and poverty are inescapable realities. When Stacy asks her mother what’s inside one of the Chinatown storefronts, her mother explains how sweatshops employ Chinese women to assemble American clothes from pieces and pay them poor wages. Through Stacy’s descriptions of Chinatown and those of the other characters in the novel, the reader is able to see the dark side of Chinatown as well as its historical significance as the center of Chinese culture and community. Stacy’s exploration of her Chinese heritage makes her aware of the many differences between life in China and life in America. When Hong Ch’un tells Stacy about the Red Guard, and how they punished her parents for holding views that they didn’t approve of, Stacy begins to understand why Hong Ch’un was suspicious of the new things and people she encountered in America. Hong Ch’un’s description of the political climate in China and the kinds of hardships that her family had to endure makes Stacy realize how much Hong Ch’un’s family’s past has shaped her present view of the world. Stacy’s relationship with Hong Ch’un helps her to see that she is not the only one trying to integrate the past with the present. By the end of the novel Stacy has gained a better understanding of the way cultural heritage influences how people feel about their cultural identity.

Another important socio-cultural concern dealt with in the novel is the pressure placed on Chinese immigrants to America to conform to American ways. When Hong Ch’un shows her disdain for Stacy’s decision to favor American culture over Chinese culture, she is reprimanded by her father for speaking negatively about life in America. He defends Stacy’s eagerness to embrace American culture, telling his daughter that: “In America, you have to be an American” (p. 13). In addressing the issue of cultural assimilation the novel points out the problems that come with rejecting a new culture in favor of the old, and with embracing a new culture so completely that nothing of the old is permitted to remain. When Stacy is first introduced to Hong Ch’un she is surprised by the other girl’s unwillingness to see anything positive about life in America. Despite her professed dislike of American ways Hong Ch’un is worried that she will not be accepted at her new school. Although she complains that Stacy has abandoned her Chinese heritage and become too “Americanized,” Hong Ch’un looks to Stacy for advice on how she should

behave. Hong Ch'un's fear of losing her Chinese identity and of not being able to make friends in America makes her feel anger towards someone as American as Stacy.

Hong Ch'un's mother also has difficulty adjusting to life in America. Mrs. Wang's inability to speak English leads to anxiety when she finds herself in situations that demand that she be able to communicate with English speaking Americans. Mrs. Wang's encounter with the cab driver shows the frustration that comes from being unable to make oneself understood. Hong Ch'un's mother's limited English makes her dependent on her husband who can speak better English. Mrs. Wang's telephone conversation with her husband on the night that Hong Ch'un disappears shows the imbalance of power in their relationship. Because she is unable to communicate with the English speaking world on her own she must rely on her husband to provide a voice for her.

Although *Thief of Hearts* points out the disadvantages of being unable to participate in the dominant culture, it also shows how sacrificing one's cultural heritage in order to be accepted by the dominant culture can be detrimental to self-esteem. Stacy's determination to be regarded as a regular American girl causes her to lose touch with important parts of her identity. When Stacy hears her mother and Tai-Pa speaking in Cantonese she feels left out because she cannot share in their conversation. Similarly, during the trip to Chinatown Stacy is dismayed by how little she knows about the family's history. She wishes that she felt as though she were part of something bigger than herself. However, the more she learns about her mother's past and about life in Chinatown the more she begins to understand what her Tai-Pa means about seeing with the heart's eyes. Although Stacy has spent most of her life thinking of herself as an American, being surrounded by Chinese culture in Chinatown makes her want to know more about her cultural heritage. The main message underlying the story of *Thief of Hearts* is that cultural assimilation must not be achieved at the expense of cultural identity. Stacy's experiences in the novel show that it is possible to take the best of both cultures and fashion a new world.

Thief of Hearts is memorable for its warm portrait of a young girl looking for her present in her past. Stacy Palmer is an engaging and believable character whose vivid descriptions of life in Chinatown make the reader see and feel from her point of view. The novel provides the reader with a variety of perspectives by drawing on the cultural experiences of three strong female characters who each embody the

voice of a different generation. The characterizations of Stacy, her mother, and her great-grandmother offer the reader a unique expression of what it means to be Chinese American.

The attention to detail in *Thief of Hearts* also provides the reader with a realistic sense of the different lifestyles that exist in the Chinese community. The novel carefully points out that all Chinese people do not speak the same language. The dialect differences that exist between many of the characters in the novel and the communication difficulties that arise from these differences are meaningfully addressed. Stacy and Hong Ch'un's use of a different Chinese word for rice porridge is one of the many character dialogues that gives the novel the ring of authenticity. The novel's references to significant events in Chinese history, and the inclusion of a Chinese folktale all contribute to the cultural meaningfulness of the narrative. Interspersed with Chinese phrases and details about Chinese culture and beliefs, *Thief of Hearts* provides the reader with an engaging and authentic literary experience.

The Sunita Experiment

Summary

In *The Sunita Experiment* 13 year old Sunita Sen must deal with having her life turned upside down by the arrival of her grandparents from India who come to stay with the Sen family for a year-long visit. Although Sunita loves her grandparents she is resentful of the many changes that their presence causes in her life. Sunita's mother's desire to prove to her parents that she is the ideal Indian daughter requires her to undergo a dramatic transformation. Sunita finds it difficult to recognize her mother in the woman she sees wearing traditional Indian clothes and deferring to her parents' every wish. She is further confused by her mother's decision to take a leave of absence from her job so that she can take better care of her parents during their stay. Adding to Sunita's distress are the upheavals in her social life that she feels are caused by her grandparents' arrival. When Sunita's mother asks her not to bring any boyfriends over until her grandparents have had time to adjust to American ways, Sunita is both irritated by having restrictions placed on her social life and relieved that she will not have to endure the embarrassment of introducing her American boyfriend to her Indian family. Sunita decides not to tell her friend Michael about her mother's request because she does not want him to think that her Indian family is strange. Sunita feels uncomfortable that her family is so different from everyone else's, and she responds to her home situation by rejecting Indian culture and avoiding her grandparents. Sunita's feelings towards her family and toward Indian culture gradually begin to change however as she learns more about her grandfather. The more she gets to know him the less strange and exotic he seems. Sunita's relationship with her mother also begins to improve once she begins to understand the kind of strain her mother is under with having her parents live with her now that she is a grown woman. As the people in Sunita's household learn to listen to one another a balance between Indian and American culture is achieved. The aspects of Sunita's Indian heritage that once seemed strange and unfamiliar begin to be a source of pleasure and curiosity. *The Sunita Experiment* ends on a positive note with Sunita realizing that she is proud of her Indian grandparents and is no longer ashamed to have friends meet her Indian family.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

Sunita Sen's confusion about who she is leads her to question the different cultural influences in her life. Sunita's mixed feelings about her cultural identity reveal how the fear of being considered un-American can lead to resentment towards one's cultural heritage. In examining Sunita's relationships with her Indian family and her American friends *The Sunita Experiment* explores Sunita's struggle to reconcile the Indian aspects of her cultural identity with the American ones.

When Sunita Sen's Indian grandparents come to stay with Sunita and her family in San Francisco Sunita finds herself thinking more and more about her cultural identity. Although Sunita's parents were born in India she never felt comfortable with her Indian ancestry. Sunita's dislike of being singled out is apparent during one of her geography classes when each student is asked to show their place of ancestry by putting a tack on the world map. Sunita laments that her tack is so far away from everyone else's. She feels envious of people who seem confident about who they are and where they come from.

Sunita's anxiety over being made to feel different is increased by her grandparents' presence, whose Indian appearance and demeanor is impossible to ignore. Sunita's lack of enthusiasm for having grandparents come to visit arises not only because of how Sunita feels about them, but because of how she fears they feel about her. Sunita thinks that the older generation in her Indian family disapproves of the younger generation's western lifestyle. Whenever Sunita hears her grandmother talking about their relatives in India Sunita feels that she is being compared to the other grandchildren and coming up short. The cultural differences between Sunita and her grandparents are evident when it comes to deciding about the kinds of activities that Sunita is permitted to take part in. When Sunita asks her father for permission to sleep over at a friend's house she is amazed by her grandfather's reaction to the request. Instead of seeing it as a normal social activity, Sunita's grandfather believes that by sleeping over at a friend's house she is telling the world that she prefers another family to her own. In her grandfather's eyes Sunita's sleepover is an activity that will bring shame on the family. Because Sunita's grandfather's opinions about what is

appropriate behavior for a girl her age are so different from her own Sunita believes that they will never be able to understand one another.

Soon after her grandparents' arrival in San Francisco Sunita decides that she cannot live a normal life while her grandparents are living with her. Although Sunita is aware of her Indian ancestry she does not feel able to relate to the Indian part of her cultural identity. Sunita is angered by the changes her mother makes at home to please her parents. When Sunita's mother asks her to try on an Indian saree she angrily responds: "If YOU want to be elected Indian woman of the year or something, just go right ahead, but LEAVE ME OUT OF IT" (Perkins, 1993, p. 117). However, when Sunita is asked to write an essay on marriage customs for a geography class she finds herself learning things about her grandparents' life in India previously unimagined. Sunita is mesmerized by her grandfather's story about how he and her grandmother met. Before listening to her grandfather Sunita would never have guessed that her grandparents' relationship was so romantic and exciting. Writing the essay about marriage customs makes Sunita realize that there is much that she doesn't know about Indian culture. When Sunita's teacher reads her essay to the class Sunita discovers that other people are interested in her grandparents' story. The system of arranged marriages described in Sunita's essay inspires a lively debate amongst classmates. Although many of the students in Sunita's class think that her grandfather's description of the Indian marriage custom is romantic, some of them object to the concept of arranged marriages. The attention that Sunita's essay receives from the other students makes her uncomfortable because her paper is so different from everyone else's. Although Sunita found her grandfather's story beautiful and romantic she doesn't like having her Indian culture singled out. However, listening to the class discussion and hearing the teacher's comments about Indian customs encourages Sunita to think about the positive ways in which Indian attitudes towards marriage differ from western ones.

As Sunita learns more about her grandparents and about India she becomes more confused about where she fits in. Sunita compares her life to the science experiment being conducted for school. She feels as though she is an unwieldy combination of American and Indian elements that do not go together. Sunita tells her grandfather that she wishes that she was either 100% Indian or 100% American because then she would not feel so confused. Part of Sunita's insecurity about identity comes from comparing her cultural background with that of a boy she likes at school. In Sunita's eyes Michael's family represents everything

that is typically American: "People like the Morrisons and Schaeffers were made of apple pie and country clubs and stained glass windows and pot roast. The Sens were made of chicken curry and sarees and sitar music and incense" (p. 85). Because Sunita does not trust Michael's ability to accept the cultural differences that exist between their families Sunita convinces herself that they are too different from one another to get along.

The misery Sunita experiences while trying to balance the Indian elements of her identity with the American ones does not go unnoticed by Sunita's grandfather. Although Sunita feels that her grandparents are responsible for much of the disruption in her life, she finds herself enjoying her grandfather's company and begins to grow closer to him. The part of her grandfather that once seemed strange to Sunita becomes more familiar through listening to her grandfather's stories about growing up in India. Working with her grandfather in the garden on the science experiment teaches Sunita something about life. Sunita's grandfather helps her to understand that people are like soil: "We have no control over which seeds are sown in our lives. But we can become good soil, receive gratefully the seeds given, and nurture them until we see fruit" (p. 122). Sunita's grandfather's insight into human nature reveals the importance of taking responsibility for one's personal development. Although Sunita may be given many challenges in life her grandfather tries to reassure her that they may be overcome if she shows enough love and care for herself.

Despite the newfound closeness between Sunita and her grandfather, Sunita still does not feel comfortable having Michael or other friends over to the house to meet the family. However, Sunita is finally forced to face her fear of being thought of as different when she overhears a girl from school making fun of the way her grandfather is dressed. Unable to endure someone making an ignorant comment about a person she loves Sunita finds the courage to confront the girl and to let everyone know that the man dressed in Indian clothing is her grandfather. Sunita's decision to approach her grandfather in the shopping mall in front of friends shows how much Sunita has matured since the beginning of the novel. No longer ashamed to be thought of as different Sunita is able to reveal her feelings for her grandfather in front of Michael and his friends. The greatest indication of the change in Sunita's attitude towards her cultural identity is a decision to have a birthday party at her house so that her friends can meet her family. Sunita's acceptance of the Indian elements of her identity is revealed in her willingness to wear the traditional Indian dress brought by her grandmother. The Indian saree that Sunita once thought of as odd and

unfashionable now seems beautiful. Moreover, her fears of being ostracized by friends at school are put to rest when she sees how impressed they are by her Indian home and family.

The Sunita Experiment fulfils its purpose to show the kinds of problems that children from nonmainstream families face in daily life. The novel's treatment of Sunita's struggle to accept her cultural identity shows a sensitivity to the problems that cultural differences create within families. Although the novel chooses not to delve deeply into issues of racism and discrimination it provides a realistic look at an Indian American family that is trying to balance Indian cultural perspectives with contemporary American ones.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

In terms of its sensitivity to socio-cultural concerns *The Sunita Experiment* focuses on the complicated nature of family relationships. The novel is particularly interested in how different cultural perspectives affect the way family members communicate with one another. When Sunita's grandparents come to stay with her family, Sunita is both perplexed and angry by the changes their arrival brings about in her mother. Sunita doesn't understand her mother's determination to become an obedient Indian daughter, when looking and acting Indian all the time appears to be so much of a strain on her professional and personal life. Sunita's discovery that her mother was passed over for a promotion makes her feel that her mother is paying the price for the Indian transformation. Seeing her mother caught between two cultural worlds serves to increase Sunita's own sense of frustration. Sunita's angry confrontation with her mother reveals how difficult it has become to balance the two cultural influences in her life. She resents her mother for adopting Indian ways to please her parents, and for trying to make the rest of the family something they're not. Sunita's attitude towards her mother's situation begins to change, however, when she overhears her mother telling a friend how difficult it is to be the kind of daughter her parents expect: "I'm not the same obedient daughter that left India all those years ago. I don't know if I *can* make them happy and proud anymore" (p. 151). Hearing her mother express feelings of insecurity helps Sunita to understand the kind of pressure her mother is under. Because Sunita knows what it is like to try to be part of two cultural worlds she is able to empathize with her mother's concerns.

In *The Sunita Experiment* cultural differences affect family relationships because they stand in the way of people's ability to truly see one another. When Sunita tells her grandfather about her mother's decision to turn down a teaching job because she is afraid that he and her mother will think that she is neglecting them, Sunita's grandfather is dismayed. Far from approving of his daughter's decision Sunita's grandfather is saddened that she felt that she should sacrifice an opportunity in order to please him. Although he comes from a culture where a woman's most important responsibility is taking care of the family, Sunita's grandfather admits he is aware that things are different in America. As Sunita listens to her grandfather talk about how proud he is of her mother's accomplishments Sunita realizes that there is room for compromise between people who possess different cultural viewpoints.

Another important issue confronted in the novel is the desire to feel like part of the mainstream culture. The words and images that Sunita associates with glamour and romance are all American ones. While listening to her grandmother speak Sunita wishes that she sounded more like Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*. Sunita's belief that things like culture and sophistication are found in places like France or Belgium, but not in India, reveals a lack of appreciation for non-European cultures. Similarly, during a reflection on appearance Sunita admits that she feels more aware of dark skin than ever before. Having reached an age where she compares herself to other girls, and to movie stars like Ingrid Bergman, Sunita feels that her skin is "too dark" (p. 42). Sunita fantasizes about looking like Ingrid Bergman because she doesn't feel that Indian features are glamorous enough. Sunita's insecurity about her appearance points out how the lack of diversity in popular American culture alienates those who are unable to conform to Euro-American standards of attractiveness.

Sunita's sensitivity to being considered different is also revealed in her relationship with Ilana, the only African American girl in her class. When Sunita overhears someone making a racist remark about "colored girls" who "stick together" Sunita responds to the incident by abandoning her friend (p. 80). Sunita's fear of being thought of as different is so great that she is willing to lose Ilana's friendship rather than be thought of as a colored girl. The novel's exploration of Sunita's cultural identity draws attention to the significance of cultural labels and what they mean. Sunita wonders whether there is a correct term for someone like her. She expresses her conflicted feelings about who she is by commenting on the dual nature of cultural identity: "On the outside, an Indian body dressed in American clothes. On the inside, total

confusion” (p. 129). Sunita envies people like Michael who is sure of who they are and where they come from. In Sunita’s view it is much simpler to know that you are the same on the inside as you are on the outside. Sunita’s confused reflections on the dual nature of racial and cultural heritage sensitively describes the experience of being caught between two cultural worlds.

In terms of presenting realistic characters and situations *The Sunita Experiment* provides a rich and interesting portrayal of an Indian family who show a wide range of perspectives and lifestyles. As the novel’s main character, Sunita is an engaging portrayal of a young girl trying to reconcile different cultural influences in her life. The novel’s fantasy sequences in which Sunita imagines herself the heroine in a variety of romantic situations give her character a believable adolescent quality, adding to her character’s appeal to young readers. *The Sunita Experiment*’s particular strength, however, is its ability to capture the details of the Sens’ everyday life. Thoughtful descriptions of Indian cooking, music, and entertainment give the novel a sense of uniqueness that makes the reader feel as though he or she is being given an inside view of a real Indian family. Moreover, the novel does not stop at portraying the superficial aspects of Indian culture. Sunita’s grandfather’s descriptions of traditional values and customs in India also create a vivid sense of place for the reader to inhabit. Through the eyes of the novel’s main characters the reader is exposed to a variety of aspects of Indian culture: moving bits of Indian poetry and philosophy enrich *The Sunita Experiment*’s cultural content and enhance the overall feeling of the book’s authenticity.

Native Canadian

My Name is SEEPEETZA

Summary

My Name is SEEPEETZA is the story of a young Salish Indian band girl growing up in the late 1950's who struggles to survive at an Indian residential school away from home and family. Based on the author's own experiences, the novel's journal format describes the students' strict, regimented existence at the school, and the kind of cruel treatment suffered by students at the hands of the religious sisters. Interwoven with Seepeetza's reflections on life at school are stories about the members of her family and life at home on the ranch. Seepeetza's journal includes moving passages about a love for the Indian way of life and a desire to be amongst people who share her understanding of what it means to be an Indian. Except for vacation times, however, Seepeetza is forced to leave behind Indian culture and to try to endure the rigors of school life. Battling the racist attitudes of the sisters and fellow classmates who dislike her for looking like a white person, Seepeetza struggles to hold on to an understanding of who she is and where she comes from. Drawing on the strength of an Indian heritage and on the love she feels for her family, Seepeetza finds the strength to survive life at the residential school and still maintain her Indian identity.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

In *My Name is SEEPEETZA* the theme of cultural identity is treated in an honest and at times painfully realistic way. Told in the form of journal entries Seepeetza's story poignantly describes her life at the residential school and the brief periods of respite from her school existence when she is allowed to go home to her family. The narrative sensitively explores Seepeetza's personal growth and her struggle to maintain an Indian identity against insuperable odds.

Seepeetza's first day at the residential school marks the beginning of many assaults on cultural identity. Offended by the sound of an Indian name the sisters at the residential school give her a new white name and command her never to say Seepeetza again. When Seepeetza compares the sisters' name with her Indian name she knows that Seepeetza is her true name because its Indian origin has personal meaning.

As well as receiving new names the Indian students are forbidden to speak Indian languages and Seepeetza lives in fear of breaking the sisters' many rules. The appalling conditions at the residential school make Seepeetza realize that Indians are considered to be unworthy of a comfortable life. The fierce form of discipline enforced at the school quickly transforms Seepeetza into a shy and obedient student. Forbidden to say anything about the school in their letters home, the injustices of life at the residential school are hidden from parents. Poor quality food and frequent beatings are among the many horrors described in Seepeetza's journal entries.

Seepeetza's suffering at the residential school is caused not only by the nuns but by the other Indian children as well. Seepeetza's green eyes, evidence of her half-Irish heritage, lead to her being mistaken for white by several of the girls at school. Because being called a *Shaman* or a white girl is one of the most damaging insults in the Indian community, Seepeetza retaliates by telling her accusers that she is a half-breed. The fact that Seepeetza's grandfather was Irish is a source of great shame to Seepeetza who wishes that she was pure Indian like her mother and her grandmother. Seepeetza fears that it is the white blood running through her veins that causes her to get angry: "It's the Irish in me that gets so mad, just like Dad. His grandfather was Irish. I know it's not the Indian in me that's mean because Yay-yah is kind and gentle, like mum. She has no white in her" (Sterling, 1992, p. 98). Seepeetza associates kindness and gentleness with her Indian nature and anger and violence with the part of her that is white. Seepeetza's dream about St. Joseph reveals her anxiety about her half-breed status. When in her dream she tells St. Joseph about her troubles he tells her that she needs to learn humility. The dream makes Seepeetza think that if she were more humble she would not lose her temper with the sisters. She believes that if only she had someone who really liked her, who wanted to be a best friend, she would not feel so angry. Alienated from the other students because of her appearance Seepeetza yearns for the love and acceptance that will bring an end to loneliness.

In contrast to Seepeetza's journal entries about an unhappy existence at school are her descriptions of life at home with her family. Seepeetza's journal entries are filled with stories about her mother and father and brothers and sisters. When Seepeetza thinks about life on the ranch she is transported beyond the cold, grey walls of school to the warm and colorful environment of home. Seepeetza writes: "When we're at home we can ride horses, go swimming at the river, run in the hills, climb trees and laugh out loud

and holler yahoo anytime we like and we won't get into trouble" (p. 14). The passages in Seepeetza's journal reveal many Indian beliefs about the value of family and the outdoors. Her descriptions of daily life on the ranch show the Indian appreciation of nature's ability to provide sustenance to those who respect the gifts she has to offer. Seepeetza's life at home revolves around working outside with the animals and making things for the home. All of Seepeetza's entries about the members of her family describe them as active, creative people who do important, meaningful work. Seepeetza believes in her mother's ability to use plants and herbs to cure sickness and speaks of her mother's activities in the home with love and admiration. Seepeetza's regard for her father is equally strong. She describes her father's activities as a court interpreter and as a political mediator in the Indian community. Speaking six different Indian languages, Seepeetza's father helps other Indians with the law, and tries to teach them about the different political parties in anticipation of the day when Indians are allowed to vote. Seepeetza's relationships with her mother and father help maintain a strong sense of Indian identity. Thinking and writing about her Indian family while she is away from home helps her to cope with the many hardships she faces at the residential school.

While she is away from home Seepeetza spends most of her time in the company of the sisters, most of whom regard the Indian children at the school as inferior beings. Referring to Seepeetza and the other girls as "amathons" (p. 82), the sisters are frequently violent with the students and look for ways to make their lives difficult. Seepeetza recounts an incident where one of the school supervisors went out of her way to prevent her sister Dorothy from studying for exams. Seepeetza's description of the supervisor's actions provides an example of the racist attitudes held by many of the sisters at the residential school. The sisters' unjust treatment of the children also shows their resentment of their success. By keeping the Indian students down the sisters are attempting to maintain the power and authority that many of them wield as weapons over the members of the Indian community. Although Seepeetza becomes used to the sisters' violent behavior she doesn't understand why they dislike her so. Seepeetza's frequent battles of will with the sisters at the residential school show her to be both a victim and a fighter. Although she is often forced to comply with the sisters' rules she rebels against them inside where they cannot see to punish her.

Seepeetza's experience as a school dancer is another aspect of life away from home that affects the way she sees herself. Seepeetza's journal entries describe the rigorous, daily regime that all of the dancers

must adhere to. Deprived of their free time the dancers are forced to practise for long hours and are severely punished when the dance teacher sees them make a mistake. Before going on stage the Indian dancers must put on costumes and make-up that transform them into white, European girls. Although Seepeetza enjoys the opportunity to become someone else and to hear the audience's applause she is constantly aware of the difference between her appearance on stage and the way she feels inside. Seepeetza's awareness of fear is revealed in her reaction to a photograph she sees of herself: "It was funny because I was smiling in those pictures. I looked happy. How can I look happy when I'm scared all the time?" (pp. 36-37). The appearance of things versus their reality characterizes Seepeetza's life at school. Although the adults who are responsible for them mistreat Indian children, to the outside world they present a picture of order and respectability. Seepeetza and the other Indian girls are forbidden by the dance teacher to talk to the white dancers they meet at competitions for fear that they will reveal something negative about the school. In the residential school, order and respectability are valued more highly than the children's happiness and well being.

Seepeetza spends most of her time at the residential school looking for ways to escape her feeling of unhappiness. Once she returns to school from home vacation she looks for ways to disappear: "When I hear the red doors slam behind me at school it's like I get a numb feeling over my body and I'm hiding way down inside myself. I don't really hear or see what's going on around me" (p. 36). In an entry describing her love of the library Seepeetza explains how reading is like going away to a different place. She likes the books that take her outside of herself where things are exciting and different. The act of reading, and writing in her journal, are Seepeetza's means of escaping the harsh realities of school life, to visit, if only in her imagination the places that bring her closer to the feeling of being home.

My Name is SEEPEETZA subtly reveals the traumatic effect that going to a residential school has on Seepeetza and the other members of her family. The fear of becoming lost is ever-present in Seepeetza's narrative: her description of a dream about the bear who turns her white like frost with the touch of a hand provides insight into Seepeetza's feelings about her identity. The experience of being forced to live away from home makes her afraid of losing touch with her Indian way of life. The bear's ability to make Seepeetza white is symbolic of her fear that the residential school will take her away from the life she loves. The longing for home that pervades Seepeetza's journal entries shows her desire to

preserve the Indian heritage. Although she cannot speak an Indian language with her parents she has a strong sense of what being an Indian means: "There is something really special about Mountain people. It's a feeling like you know who you are, and you know each other. You belong to the mountains" (p. 91). Despite all of the assaults on her identity at the residential school Seepeetza's desire to return to the life she has left behind remains intact. Her finished journal is proof of this commitment to her cultural heritage. Filled with Indian values and beliefs, as well as stories about her family, Seepeetza's journal writing is her way of keeping her Indian home close when she is forced to be away from it. Seepeetza's decision to ask her grandmother to weave fireweed flowers into a special cover for her journal shows a desire to connect the journal to Indian culture. *My Name is SEEPEETZA*'S treatment of the theme of cultural identity successfully achieves its purpose of revealing the strength of cultural ties and their ability to withstand even the greatest challenges.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

In its treatment of the theme of cultural identity *My Name is SEEPEETZA* thoughtfully addresses several socio-cultural and historical concerns important to Native Canadians. The novel draws on Seepeetza's experiences at home and at school to point out the different cultural dimensions of Indian life and the tremendous impact that institutional racism had on the kind of education received by Canada's Native children.

The fact that it is necessary for Seepeetza to leave home to attend school in 1958 is due to the law in place at that time requiring all Status Indians to go to residential schools. *My Name is Seepeetza* sensitively reveals how this historical fact altered the lives of thousands of Canada's Status Indians. In addressing the issue of education and its influence on Native people the novel includes several different Native perspectives on the subject. The older generations of Indians in Seepeetza's family regard education in a school environment as something that is detrimental to Indian life. Seepeetza recalls her mother telling her that Seepeetza's grandmother didn't want her children to go to school when they were young because "school would turn them into white people. They wouldn't be able to hunt or fish or make baskets or anything useful anymore" (p. 29). In the eyes of Seepeetza's grandmother the result of a white education is the loss of Indian culture. Seepeetza explains that her mother only went to grade three because

the sisters strapped her all the time for speaking her Native language. To protect the children from being mistreated the way she was Seepeetza's mother chose not to teach them to speak Indian. Despite their negative experiences at the residential school Seepeetza's parents see the value of education differently than their parents. Seepeetza's father tells her and her brother that although school is a difficult place to be for Indians, they need to get an education in order to survive. Seepeetza's father's attitude towards school provides insight into the way Indian life is changing. He wants his children to get an education so that when traditional Indian occupations like ranching are no longer profitable they will have other opportunities. Although Seepeetza hates living at the residential school, she enjoys being a good student. When an English teacher says she has a talent for writing Seepeetza expresses how wonderful it makes her feel: "I pretended to read but I couldn't think for a long time. A golden feeling kept washing over me" (p. 61). Despite the misery she endures living with the sisters Seepeetza's education exerts some positive influences on her self-esteem.

Another socio-cultural concern treated in the novel is the influence of religion on Indian life. At the residential school the students' daily routines revolve around prayer and other forms of religious instruction. The sisters' constant talk of the terrible punishments that await sinners make Seepeetza afraid that she will go to hell. Every nook and cranny in the residential school becomes a frightening place for Seepeetza and the other students, who are made to believe that devils are lurking all around, waiting to drag their sinning souls down to hell. The sisters' appearance and behavior are so different from anything that she has encountered before that the sisters seem almost inhuman. The novel's exploration of the relationship between the sisters and the Indian children shows how the sisters use religion as a means of discipline and control.

At home on the ranch with her family Seepeetza is surrounded by different attitudes towards religion. Although her mother and grandmother befriend the local priest Seepeetza's father and uncle detest the hypocrisy that they believe exists within the priesthood. Referring to the father's accumulation of worldly goods Seepeetza's uncle complains: "Jesus was poor. They drive fancy new cars" (p. 118). However, despite her father's apparent cynicism towards religion Seepeetza discovers him "crying and saying sorry to God when he didn't know anyone was around" (p. 119). The Indian attitudes toward religion portrayed in the novel combine strong faith with feelings of fear and mistrust. Although religion is

sometimes treated as a source of strength and comfort, the novel also points out the ways in which it is used to frighten people into submission. Seepeetza's response to her father's drinking reveals how she has been influenced by the sisters' constant lectures on the wages of sin. Seepeetza warns her father that he must stop abusing liquor or he will go to hell.

The presence of alcohol abuse amongst Indian people is addressed in Seepeetza's journal entries about her father. Although drunken outbursts are rare in Seepeetza's family they frighten both Seepeetza and her mother when they occur. Seepeetza's descriptions of the occasions when her father drinks offer insight into some of the historical concerns that have impacted on the Indian way of life. When Seepeetza's father drinks he talks about the second world war and the terrible things he saw. The novel's portrayal of Seepeetza's father's suffering suggests the difficulty that many Indians encountered when they tried to reconcile their participation in the concerns of the dominant culture with their own values and beliefs.

Seepeetza's entries about life on the ranch also include many descriptions of Indian culture and traditions. Seepeetza learns about her cultural past from her parents and from other members of the Indian community who frequently tell stories about how their ancestors used to live. Seepeetza also explains the value that the Indian community places on the wisdom of its older members. She describes how the older people teach the younger generation about nature and how to share in the gifts it has to offer. In its exploration of Seepeetza's cultural identity the novel sensitively juxtaposes the institutional environment of the residential school with the natural environment of Seepeetza's home on the ranch. Both places have a strong influence on Seepeetza's feelings about herself and the world around her.

Seepeetza's greatest challenge at the residential school is to preserve her cultural identity from the forces that seek to assimilate her to the dominant culture. The sisters try to undermine Seepeetza's and other students' cultural identity by taking away all vestiges of their Indian life. The Indian girls are forced to wear their hair in bowl cuts because the sisters complain that long straight hair makes them look like wild Indians. Deprived of her name and clothing Seepeetza is forced to deny all that being an Indian means to her. When Seepeetza thinks about the kinds of Indians that she sees in the movies she feels as though she can almost understand the sisters' dislike of Indians. However, comparing real Indians to the ones in the movies she says that: "The Indians in the movies are not like anyone I know. Real Indians are just like

anyone else except they love the mountains” (p. 90). Despite all of the sisters’ efforts to diminish her identity Seepeetza’s feelings of love and commitment towards her Indian community remain unshakable. Although the residential school is an inescapable reality, the time that Seepeetza spends at home on the ranch is enough to keep her Indian identity alive and well.

The journal entry format of *My Name is SEEPEETZA* provides an intimate understanding of a young Indian girl’s hopes and fears. The characterization of Seepeetza is strikingly honest and possesses great emotional depth. Her straightforward observations of the situations and people around her make the reader a part of the world of the novel as it is viewed from her perspective. Seepeetza’s moving revelations about her worlds of home and school are at times filled with a profound sense of fear and despair and at others convey a strong sense of peace and contentment.

The novel effectively captures the everyday life of the Indian community as well as the harsh realities of school life. Seepeetza’s home-life is conveyed through vivid descriptions of her community’s customs and traditions. Seepeetza’s entries about visiting friends and relatives and camping in the mountains give the reader a sense of the importance of sharing and storytelling amongst the mountain people. For the Indian community these social occasions are opportunities to learn the wisdom of the old people, and to exchange stories of one another’s ancestors. The Indian funeral ceremony Potlatch is presented to the reader in a way that allows him or her to imagine the sights and sounds of the occasion as they would have been experienced by Seepeetza. The novel’s many descriptions of Indian meals, and of the care and preparation involved in making food for special holidays and celebrations, contribute to the feeling of authenticity that takes hold of readers from the first page of Seepeetza’s journal and does not let them go until her last word of the final entry. The strength and closeness of Seepeetza’s family ties are communicated to the reader in a thoughtful and engaging way. Seepeetza’s faithful recording of her experiences allows the reader to see and feel a unique vision of the Indian experience in Canada as it unfolds in the pages of her journal.

*Silent Words*Summary

Silent Words tells the story of Danny Lynx, a young Native boy who leaves his abusive home to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Once he is on his own Danny's daily life becomes a struggle for survival. Danny's determination to find his mother gives him the strength to continue this journey when he fears that the obstacles of hunger and lack of shelter are too great to overcome. Danny is not on his own for long, however, before a family takes him in and tries to reconcile him with his father. Terrified by the prospect of returning home to his father's cruel girlfriend Danny resolves to keep running. Travelling through a series of Native communities along the CN mainline Danny forms meaningful relationships with several Native people who teach him some of the beliefs and values that characterize Native culture. Danny's experiences on the journey provide him with new understanding about himself and the world he lives in. When Danny is finally reunited with his father, who seeks Danny's forgiveness for his past behavior, he realizes that his father has also changed. The reunion between father and son takes a painful turn however when Danny learns that his mother died of cancer while he was looking for her. Distraught by the news of his mother's death Danny tries to run away again but ends up reconciling with his father after he promises to take care of him and to make up for past mistakes. However, once Danny arrives at his father's new trapper cabin he mistakes a woman he sees there for his father's former abusive girlfriend. Overwhelmed by his fear of being hurt again Danny picks up a gun and accidentally wounds his father. The epilogue of the novel finds Danny a young man who is about to be married. He has returned to the Native community where he made many friends on his journey and is building a home there. Danny has put away the anger he once felt towards his father and has committed himself to taking care of him. At the end of the novel Danny has found the self-knowledge that he was searching for. He knows his place in the world and has learned to speak the silent words that are at the heart of Native expression.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

Danny Lynx's journey of self-discovery in *Silent Words* meaningfully explores the issue of cultural identity, particularly how it is nurtured and developed by social relationships. All of Danny's experiences with the people encountered during his travels contribute to the development of self-esteem and his understanding of cultural heritage. The lessons that Danny learns about Native identity during the course of the novel are interwoven with his experiences in the different Native communities that he discovers during his travels.

Living in town with his father and his father's girlfriend Sara, Danny feels abandoned and unhappy. Forced to endure both physical and mental abuse from his father's girlfriend, Danny desperately misses his mother who went away when she discovered Danny's father cheating on her with another woman. Tired of struggling to survive in an abusive home Danny dreams of escaping from this unhappy situation and finding his mother. Before he sets out in his journey Danny feels alone in the world without friends or family to turn to. Having never had a sense of belonging to a particular community Danny has learned little about his Native background. The name calling that Danny receives from his friend Tom reveals the undercurrents of racism that exist in Tom's attitude towards Native people. When Tom accuses Danny of acting like a wild Indian Danny is angered but does not know how to refute the stereotype. It is not until Danny sets out on his own that he begins to learn about what being a Native person means.

During his first night away from home Danny faces the hardships of being a runaway. Although he was deprived of many things at home, the perils of hunger and the elements are new dangers that he must endure alone. After spending a difficult night in the outdoors Danny encounters some Ojibway children who befriend him when they discover that he is able to speak their language. In the company of the Ojibway children Danny experiences Native hospitality for the first time. When the children take him to their home for dinner he discovers that their family accepts him even though he is a stranger. Unwilling to stay too long in one place for fear of being discovered however, Danny continues his search for his mother.

Danny's next encounter is with Charlie, a CN foreman who takes him home to spend the night with his family. The time that Danny spends with Charlie's children makes him long to be part of a family

again. During a fishing trip with Charlie Danny remembers similar outings with his father and wishes that things between him and his Dad could go back to the way they were when Danny was little. Amazed by the kindness he receives from Charlie and his family Danny willingly accepts Charlie's advice to "listen, watch, and learn" (Slipperjack, 1992, p. 42). Although he is not sure of what this means he resolves to remember Charlie's advice.

Once he leaves his pleasant taste of family life behind Danny is on his own once more until he meets Mr. and Mrs. Old Indian. In the elderly couple's cabin Danny is exposed to religion for the first time in his life. Through listening to Mr. Old Indian's stories Danny learns what it means to think of oneself as a child of the earth. Danny's interactions with the old couple help him to understand that all Native people are not the same. On the first night of his stay with Mr. and Mrs. Old Indian Danny is surprised to discover that they do not speak Indian but a form of Latin, a language that he had not known existed. The most important kind of expression that Danny learns from the old couple, however, is that which does not require any words. Danny describes one of their meal time conversations: "No one said a word but we said a lot" (p. 60). Danny's time with the Indian couple helps him to understand how silent words are an integral part of Native expression. Danny's sense of cultural identity strengthens as he begins to communicate more effectively with the Native people he meets.

The next phase of the journey begins when Danny discovers that his mother is not in the vicinity as he had been led to believe. Disappointed his search's failure Danny wonders where to go next. Danny's destination is chosen for him when he is invited home with a boy named Harry, whom he meets on the train. At home with Harry and his father, Danny is once more impressed by people's kindness. Harry's willingness to share his food and clothing reinforces Danny's growing understanding of the spirit of generosity that exists amongst the people who live in Native communities. Living with Charlie and his father teaches him about other aspects of native life as well. Danny develops an appreciation for being in the outdoors that he had never known before: "I took everything in. I wanted to remember this" (p. 75). Danny discovers that spending so much time in nature has altered his concept of time. He realizes that he no longer knows or cares what time it is. Part of Danny's growing awareness of his Native identity is the realization that time is accounted for differently in Native life. Changes in the natural world are more significant indicators of time passing than the hands of a clock. Under the tutelage of Henry and his father

Danny learns how to fish and how to make a proper fire. Aside from the practical skills Danny learns from Henry and his father he also develops a glimmer of understanding of Native philosophy. When Danny first overhears Henry and his father discussing the life of a fish he is perplexed by their interest in something so insignificant. However, the more time that Danny spends hunting and fishing outdoors, the more he begins to think about the creatures that inhabit the natural world.

Danny's understanding of himself and of nature is explored even further when he embarks on a canoe trip with an old man that he meets after leaving Henry and his father. Alone on the water with Ol' Jim, Danny learns more about the power of silent words. The ease with which Danny has learned to communicate both in Ojibway and with actions shows how much he has learned about Native forms of expression since the beginning of his journey. Before Danny left home he was so unused to speaking Ojibway that he had forgotten many of the words, but by the time he encounters Ol' Jim Danny has regained his grasp of the Native language.

The time that Danny spends with Ol' Jim improves his self-esteem. With no stores or modern conveniences to rely on Danny discovers that he can do things for himself. Danny also learns the value of doing things for other people. When Danny sees Ol' Jim give their dinner away to an old man they encounter at one of the campsites, he is reminded of how much he has benefited from other people's generosity. Being in the outdoors with Ol' Jim teaches him about what nature has to offer. He discovers there is meaning to be found in the sights and sounds around him. Reflecting on how these experiences with Ol' Jim have enhanced his perceptions, Danny remembers how a short time ago the sound of birds was just noise, while now their songs seem filled with stories. Danny's canoe trip with Ol' Jim has a healing effect in that he feels safe and at home in a way that he has not felt since he was with his mother.

The sense of connection that Danny experiences with the people he meets on his journey, and with the natural world, allows him to recover from the pain he endured at the hands of his father. However, despite the closeness of the relationships he forms Danny continues to feel as though he is on the outside looking in. He longs for a real home where he is accepted and loved for who he is. When Danny learns about his mother's death his dream of having a real home is shattered once more. The loss of his mother makes Danny feel that the journey has lost its purpose because there is no longer anyone for him to run to. Overcome by the losses he suffered during his journey Danny allows himself to be moved by his father's

pleas for forgiveness and agrees to return home. When he finds himself in his father's hunting shack however, Danny's painful remembrances lead to confusion. Mistaking his father's new friend for the woman who used to hurt him Danny runs away from the shack and finds a place to hide. Hearing the sound of his father's voice causes Danny to panic and he grabs a gun to protect himself. Although Danny only intends to scare his father and the woman with him, the gun accidentally goes off, seriously wounding Danny's father.

The Epilogue of *Silent Words* finds Danny a young, about to be married, man, who is reflecting on his painful past and happy present. About to embark on a new life in a community of friends and family Danny speaks of his commitment to his father: "I will look after him and take care of him for as long as I live" (p. 250). The self-knowledge that Danny has acquired throughout the novel has given him the strength to overcome anger towards his father and to build a new relationship with him. Danny explains how his journey from child to adult has shaped his experience: "You can't escape the silent words of your memory. They grow on you, layer after layer, year after year, documenting you from beginning to end, from the core to the surface" (p. 250). The treatment of Danny's journey of self-discovery in *Silent Words* reveals how pain and loss can bring greater wisdom and understanding. Danny's experiences have taught him that his sad memories are as much a part of him as the Native values that he has chosen to embrace. In his adult life Danny recognizes that there is a place in him for all of the silent words in his memory, both the good and the bad.

Analysis of Meaningfulness.

Danny's journey of self-discovery addresses many of the socio-cultural and historical concerns relevant to Canada's Native people. Danny's exploration of cultural identity and his struggle to come to terms with his relationship with his father are intertwined with the lifestyle changes affecting traditional Native communities. In Danny's view the event that influenced his family's way of life the most was his father's decision to leave their trapper's shack in the woods and move into town. Before Danny's family left their rural home Danny believed that his home life was fine. However, the growing economic hardship faced by Native people trying to preserve their traditional occupations made working in town an appealing prospect to Danny's father and many other Native people. The job opportunities available to Native people

however were extremely few. As Danny points out, that except for working on the CN, "there are no other jobs" (p. 73). The differences between Native people who live in the city and Native people who still live in the rural areas are alluded to throughout the novel. Danny's lack of knowledge about hunting and fishing practices lead some of the Native people he encounters to laughingly refer to him as a "City Indian" (p. 83). The development of Danny's cultural identity is nurtured by his encounters with people who seek to maintain the traditional values of Native life. During the course of his journey through various communities Danny learns how to hunt, fish, cook, and find shelter.

The intimate view of Native life presented in *Silent Words* also points out some of the social problems affecting Native people. Danny's conviction that his father's transformation from a gentle, quiet man to an angry abusive one began to take place once his family moved from the woods to the reserve points out how socio-cultural changes in the Native community have negatively altered traditional Native lifestyles. The anger expressed by Danny's father is indicative of his resentment over having a traditional way of life taken from him.

The values, beliefs, and legends that form an integral part of Native life are also explored in the novel. Danny's friendship with Ol' Jim teaches him a great deal about Native history. During the time they spend together Ol' Jim tells Danny about the people who used to live in the places that they are using as campsites. Danny learns about the Memegwesi, an ancient people who lived in rocks and who had the power to give the people they encountered all that they needed if they could provide something in return. After watching Ol' Jim leave the Memegwesi some tobacco to show them that he remembers they are relatives, Danny begins to understand the richness of his Native past and the importance of remembering his connection to the people who came before him. Ol' Jim tells Danny that he needs to listen to what he is told: "It is important to remember exactly what is said so that you in turn, when you are an old man, can tell it to a little person like you" (pp. 143-144). The Native wisdom that Ol' Jim shares with Danny in the novel reveals the function of oral history in the Native community. Many of the discoveries that Danny makes about himself and the world he lives in come from listening to other people talk about their experiences and what they learned from them. The Epilogue of *Silent Words* is a testament to Danny's ability to learn from others, and to share the fruits of his own journey of self-discovery with the reader. By the end of the novel Danny has gained many insights into his relationship with his father. The love and

security that he finds within the Native community help him to understand his father's fears about being able to take care of him outside of that community, in a place that does not value the skills he has to offer. Danny learns to share his father's sentiments about the quality of life away from town: "Out here I am myself. This is my world and I belong here, and I know that as hard as I try, I will never be happy anywhere else" (p. 242). Danny's resolution to take care of his father and to make his home within the Native community reveals his commitment to the Native way of life that he has come to love and understand. Danny's journey of self-discovery brings him not only self-knowledge but a sense of community and belonging as well.

The focus on the importance of developing one's cultural identity in *Silent Words* undermines the notion of cultural assimilation. The purpose of Danny's journey of self-discovery is to find the strength that comes from knowing who you are and where you come from. The novel's thematic content emphasizes the need to maintain one's ties with the cultural past in order to preserve a way of life that allows the Native sense of cultural identity to be passed on to future generations. In *Silent Words* the breakdown of traditional Native lifestyles is detrimental to the people who live in Native communities. For Danny, and for the people that he encounters on his journey, self-knowledge can only be achieved through understanding one's relationship to the values, beliefs, and ideas that are an essential part of Native culture.

Told from Danny's perspective the narrative of *Silent Words* makes the reader feel as though he or she is undergoing Danny's journey with him. Powerful emotional responses are generated in the reader as he or she shares Danny's anxiety over losing his money, being caught by his father, or finding himself alone in a strange place. The many people that Danny encounters during his travels provide the reader with an intimate view of the variety of perspectives and lifestyles present in the Native community. Danny's encounter with both older and younger generations of Native people offer the reader insight into the richness of Native history and legend, as well as into some of the contemporary problems facing Canada's Native people.

The deep and complex characterization of Danny, and of the people that he encounters in the novel, move the reader to identify with specific characters and to empathize with Danny over the painful losses that he suffers during his journey. The reader learns along with Danny the values that govern the Native community: being nonjudgmental, open and accepting, sharing with others, and respecting elders.

The novel's vivid descriptions of the physical environment of various Native communities and of the people who inhabit them give the reader a clear picture of Danny's world. The language in the novel is simple and accessible, effectively capturing the voice and inner life of a twelve-year old boy. The greatest strength of *Silent Words* as a Native Canadian novel, however, is its ability to convey to the reader with English words, the subtle forms of non-verbal communication, the rich connotations, the "Silent Words" that are at the heart of Native expression.

*Native American**The Ceremony of Innocence*Summary

The Ceremony of Innocence tells the story of Amana, a Northern Plains Indian who faces many hardships in her struggle to survive after the death of her husband and the loss of her tribe. When Amana's story begins she is a young woman alone in the world without friends or family. Deserted by her people because they blame her for her husband's death, Amana is left to beg for coins in the white men's trading camps. Weak with hunger and loneliness Amana is barely able to keep herself alive when she meets Amalia, a French-Cree prostitute, whose strength and generosity provide Amana with a home and someone to care for her. However, a breach in Amana and Amalia's friendship occurs when Amana falls in love with Jean-Pierre, a charming white trader who eventually abandons Amana and their unborn child to return to his wife and children in Montreal. Alone once more, Amana and her baby daughter Jemina are left to starve on an Indian reservation until Amalia finds them and takes them home with her. Amana and her daughter are given a new start in Fort Benton where Amana finds a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant. Although in this new life Amana no longer suffers from lack of food or shelter, she is distraught by the loss of her Indian identity. Watching Jemina grow up amongst white people Amana is saddened that she was not able to teach her daughter the ways of her people. Rejected by the white man's world and ashamed of her Indian heritage, Jemina grows up not understanding who she is or where she belongs. Amana and her daughter's unhappiness continue when Jemina marries an Indian man whose alcoholism leads their family into financial ruin. After the death of Amalia, Amana follows Jemina to the rodeo circuit where she looks after her grandchildren and tries to teach them about the Indian heritage. Despite her suffering Amana maintains the hope that the old ways will be reborn with a new generation. Amana believes her dreams for the future will be realized through Jemina's youngest son who shares Amana's love for the Indian past. The novel ends with Amana as an old woman praying to the sun that her grandson will be returned so that she can teach him about his cultural heritage.

Analysis

Description of thematic content.

In *The Ceremony of Innocence* the theme of cultural identity is given a grim and realistic treatment. Amana's struggle to preserve her cultural heritage in a changing world reveals the painful conflict between the white man's dream of progress and the traditional values of the Indian people. Fearing the old ways will be forgotten, Amana searches for someone to give the gifts of the past, so that her Indian ancestry may be born again in a new generation.

Alone in the world after her husband is killed in a buffalo hunt, Amana is left to beg the white men that she meets at trading posts for money. Aware that the arrival of the white man has changed the old ways forever, Amana sees how all around the Indian way of life is collapsing. Deprived of the Indian community Amana decides that to have a reason to live she must try to learn to be someone else if she can no longer be an Indian. Amana's desire for a new life propels her into a relationship with Jean-Pierre Bonneville, a young white trader who woos Amana by honoring her Indian heritage. Despite her love for Jean-Pierre Amana discovers that it is not easy for her to adopt a white woman's way of life. In Jean-Pierre's house Amana feels like a stranger who does not belong. She is uncomfortable wearing a white woman's dress, sitting on a chair, and speaking a language that is not her own. Without the words of her youth Amana feels "weak and defenseless, like something new and as yet unformed" (Highwater, 1985, p. 39). In an attempt to preserve something of her Indian self Amana refuses to take off her snakeskin belt when Jean-Pierre requests it. However, when Amana begins to feel that she has compromised too much of her Indian identity she takes off the belt and hides it so that she will not be reminded of what is lost. Amana finds that she is afraid of her sense of not being herself because "she dreaded what she was becoming" (p. 39). Amana's relationship with Jean-Pierre is painful for her because it causes the loss of the Indian part of her identity.

When Amana is reunited with the people from her old tribe she is overjoyed. Being able to hear and speak her own language makes Amana feel like an Indian again. The news that she receives from the elders of the tribe, however, makes her realize how the Indians' view of the white man has changed. No longer accepted as a person belonging to another tribe Amana's people regard the white man with

suspicion. In her efforts to convince the elders that Jean-Pierre is a friend to the Indians Amana is torn between loyalty to her tribe and love for Jean-Pierre. Although Amana believes that Jean-Pierre is sympathetic to the Indians' situation she knows that he would be unwilling to side with them if a conflict were to break out between her people and the white traders. Amana's doubts about her relationship with Jean-Pierre intensify when she encounters an Indian woman who has been abandoned by her white lover. The woman's revelation that her lover left her to return to his white wife and family fills Amana with despair. Amana's insecurities about Jean-Pierre's love for her are intimately intertwined with an awareness of their cultural differences. The arrival of the white women at the camp makes her realize how differently the white men treat white women from Indian women. Amana also sees how much dislike the white women have for the white men who have taken Indian women as wives. The white women regard Indian women with disdain and will not allow their children to play with the half-breed children. Amana's fears about the strength of Jean-Pierre's affection for her are confirmed when he leaves the camp to return to his wife and children.

The next phase of Amana's life begins in Fort Benton where she and her daughter go to live with Amalia. Part of the white man's world once more Amana's Indian identity is again under attack. Surrounded by the white man's hunger for fashion and riches Amana is saddened that she had not been able to give her daughter the gifts of the Indian heritage. Jemina rejects her mother's attempts to tell the stories of her ancestors, and Amana begins to fear that the words and stories of the Indian past are falling away. When Amalia pays to send Jemina away to a private school for girls Amana loses all hope of teaching her daughter the Indian values that are so much a part of who she is. Jemina's return to Fort Benton after several years away at school forces Amana to see how estranged she and her daughter have become from one another. Schooled in English manners and traditions Jemina has become almost unrecognizable to her mother. After failing in her efforts to communicate with her daughter Amana is forced to accept that Jemina is ashamed of her Indian heritage. She longs to be like the wealthy, European women she sees in magazines. Jemina's confession that she doesn't know who she is makes Amana realize that at least she has been able to dream of her Indian identity, but that Jemina has had nothing. Jemina's experience of being caught between two cultural worlds has led to her being treated like an outcast in both of them. Jemina's lack of acceptance by the dominant white culture causes her to feel even more ashamed of her

Indian heritage. Jemina expresses anger over being thought of as an Indian to her mother: "My name is Jemina Bonneville. I'm just as white as any of them. I speak better English than they do, and I know about things they've never heard of" (p. 109). The gap between Amana and her daughter widens as Amana faces the painful realization that Jemina wants so desperately to be thought of as white that she doesn't want to be seen with an Indian mother.

After years of hardship and feeling invisible Amana finally finds happiness in the American northern plains. Amana's cultural identity is reaffirmed through her friendship with two Blackfoot Indians and the love she has for her second grandchild. Amana's dream that the old days will be remembered are finally realized with the birth of her grandson, who eagerly listens to his grandmother's stories about the past, and who embraces the Indian values and traditions that his grandmother shares with him. However, when Sitko is sent to boarding school Amana is heartbroken once more. The end of the novel finds Amana praying to the sun for courage and asking that her grandson be returned so she can teach him the ways of her people.

The telling of Amana's story in *The Ceremony of Innocence* gives the reader a realistic sense of the Indian past by describing one woman's courage and her determination to survive despite insurmountable obstacles. The novel's treatment of the theme of cultural identity fulfills its purpose to portray the Indians' struggle to preserve their way of life in the face of contemporary realities.

Analysis of meaningfulness.

Underlying the narrative of Amana's life in *The Ceremony of Innocence* are the many historical and socio-cultural concerns affecting the Northern Plains Indians and their way of life. The world of the novel is a world in transition. Amana's descriptions of the relationship between the Indian and the white man, and of the economic hardship faced by the former provide insight into an Indian culture that is beginning to die. Amana's determination to preserve her cultural identity when the Indian people's way of life is collapsing is a powerful testament to one woman's strength and courage.

The socio-cultural concerns treated in the novel deal with the conflicts between the Indians and the white men as well as with the unrest within the Indian community. At the beginning of the novel Amana is alone because the people of her tribe chose to desert her. Amana's explanation of why her tribe made her

an outcast reveals the unequal status of women within the Indian community. Because she chose to be a hunter and a warrior instead of staying home like the other women in her tribe Amana's people blamed her for her husband's death. The fact that Amana's independence and her hunting abilities are at odds with her people's understanding of women's roles points out that limitations on women's freedom are a reality in both the white man's world and in the Indian world. By revealing the inequalities that exist in both cultures the novel shows the ways in which they are similar as well as the ways in which they are different.

The changes in the Indian way of life that occur after the arrival of the white man are portrayed in a way that is both grim and unforgettable. When the white soldiers force the few free Indians that remain at the trading camp to move to a government designated reserve, the effect on the Indians is tragic. Forced to inhabit a barren stretch of land where there is no game for them to hunt the Indian people are given no choice but to accept a life of hunger and humiliation. The novel's descriptions of the relations between the Indians and the white man point out the white man's inability to recognize tribal differences. An elder in Amana's tribe laments the white man's determination to see Indians as all one people. When one tribe of Indians commits what the white man perceives to be a crime, the white men blame every Indian without making an effort to distinguish one tribe from another. *The Ceremony of Innocence's* depiction of the relationship between the Indians and the white man effectively captures the Indian perspective and points out the transformative power of the Indians' relationship with the white man in terms of its consequences for the Indian way of life.

The issue of cultural assimilation is confronted throughout the novel as Amana struggles to maintain her Indian culture and identity. Amana's desire to preserve her Indian appearance is evident in her reluctance to wear a "white woman's dress"(p. 13). Although Amana allows Amalia to persuade her to take off her Indian clothing she refuses to cut her long, dark hair, a feature that she feels identifies her as an Indian woman.

In addition to maintaining her Indian appearance Amana is committed to retaining the values and spirituality that are essential to Indian life. Although Amana is moved by a visiting minister's story about Jesus Christ she tells him that she cannot accept his form of religion because she has her own. Upon seeing the minister's disappointment at her decision Amana tells him: "It is good that you believe this marvelous story about Jesus. But it is your story; it is not mine. I do not have enough time in my life to understand

your religion and so I must try to understand my own" (p. 105). Amana's determination to hang on to her Indian spirituality even if it means that she will be regarded as a heathen by the Christian community reveals her unwillingness to compromise her beliefs so that she will be acceptable to her white neighbors.

However, despite Amana's determination to protect her Indian identity from cultural assimilation, she is unable to help her daughter to do the same. On Jemina's wedding day Amana is unhappy knowing that her daughter will be married in a white man's church with none of the Indian traditions to support her in her new life. When Jemina asks her mother why she is so unhappy Amana replies: "I am unhappy my child, because I am like my grandmothers of many years ago. I sometimes think that I have lived too long. I have seen too many good people die and all of our traditions disappear, leaving nothing" (p. 130). Amana's sadness over her daughter's marriage is alleviated somewhat by the knowledge that Jemina is marrying a man that is half-Indian and half-Jamaican. She hopes that Jemina's marriage to a man who has a strong sense of his cultural identity will help her to accept her own Indian heritage. Amana is disappointed however, because for Jemina cultural assimilation is preferable to preserving a cultural identity that brings both pain and humiliation. When Jemina leaves her son with Amana to raise she tells her mother: "I want Reno to grow up to be a regular little boy. I want him to have friends and be happy. He needs to learn how to be an American (p. 146). Jemina does not share her mother's desire to rekindle the old ways because she feels the only way to achieve happiness is by conforming to the dominant culture. Unable to overcome her daughter's attitude towards Indian culture, Amana fails in her attempts to teach her first grandson the values of Indian life. Instead she must endure the pain that comes with seeing her grandson absorb the white man's racist attitude towards Indians. The different perspectives on cultural identity portrayed in the novel point out the vast differences in outlook between older and younger generations.

For most of her life Amana is unable to escape from an existence that devalues her Indian identity. Even the prospect of returning to the Indian community seems out of reach. When Amana applies to return to her reservation she is denied housing because the reservation authorities have no record of Amana's family in the tribal logs. Alienated from the Indian community for being a non-status Indian Amana is forced to remain in a world that doesn't understand or care about her. By pointing out the unfairness of the

reserve authorities the novel shows sensitivity to the socio-cultural problems that Indians face within the Indian community as well as outside of it.

Underlying Amana's story in *The Ceremony of Innocence* is the conviction that Indian culture is not a thing of the past. Amana's commitment to pass on the values and traditions of the Indian people provides hope for the future. By refusing to let her cultural legacy vanish from the earth Amana is helping to create the possibility for its renewal. Amana's efforts to share the ways of her people with her grandson, and with Indians from other tribes, is her way of breathing new life into Indian culture so that it will continue to survive in modern times. The novel powerfully communicates to the reader the idea that the Indian heritage is not dead, but will live forever in the people who care enough about the past to carry it with them always.

In terms of the relating of the narrative, *The Ceremony of Innocence* differs from the other books included in this study in that it is written in the third person. The novel's different use of perspective, however, is extremely effective in capturing the intensity of Amana's feelings and emotions. Amana's struggles as a poor young woman suffering from hunger and deprivation, to her determined efforts to preserve cultural identity are conveyed to the reader in a way which enables him or her to empathize with Amana's situation and to identify with her as a character.

Amana's moving narrative of her experiences is enlivened by descriptions of the important people in her life. Amana's best friend Amalia and Amana's daughter Jemina are other examples of strong women who seek to find happiness and success in a changing world. In exploring the lives of Amana and her family the novel reveals the variety of lifestyles chosen by people of Indian heritage. Amana's descriptions of Indian beliefs and practices, particularly of the Blackfoot beaver ceremony give the reader a vision of cultural identity that is charged with meaning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

This chapter contains a summary of the study as presented in the three previous chapters. Further, it provides a three-part discussion of this study's conclusions based on my analysis of the thematic content of nine young adult multicultural novels. The first part of the conclusion section will examine the two major approaches to the theme of cultural identity that emerged from my analysis. The next section will outline the thematic connections among the books, specifically the kinds of social insights and common concerns expressed in the novels that relate to cultural identity. Finally, I will discuss the implications of multicultural fiction for engaging students in a personal exploration of literature and for redescribing the scene of reading in the classroom as a scene of learning. The chapter will conclude with my recommendations for further research in the area of multicultural literature.

Summary of Study

The focus of this study has been on examining the potential of young adult multicultural literature to engage students in a meaningful exploration of the theme of cultural identity. My thematic content analysis of the literature was primarily concerned with understanding how the theme of cultural identity was explored in each of the novels and with what social insights could be gained from reading a particular text. The prefatory research for this study examined several of the educational philosophies surrounding the use of multicultural literature in the classroom, as well as the pedagogical impetus behind connecting students with literature that is meaningful to their culture and experience. A major goal of this research was to provide parents and educators with an analytic model for selecting multicultural books for the home and classroom. To conduct my analysis of the literature I selected nine young adult multicultural fiction books on the basis of three criteria: 1. Characterization, 2. Theme, and 3. Authenticity of Cultural Voice. Once the book selection process was complete I engaged in a preliminary reading of the texts followed by a close reading during which time I applied the specific criteria for my two-part analysis. Evaluating each

novel in terms of its potential for reader engagement the first part of my analysis looked specifically at the thematic content of the novels, while the second part considered the meaningfulness of the work in relation to the young adolescent reader. Throughout my analysis of the literature I maintained a critical focus on the books' socio-historical and cultural dimensions in relation to their treatment of the theme of cultural identity. From my analysis of the nine books three important issues arose: the first issue dealt with the effectiveness of the novels' treatment of the theme of cultural identity. The novels' use of two major approaches to explore the theme of cultural identity created the opportunity to contrast what each approach has to offer the reader in terms of insight into multicultural experience. The second issue focused on the common themes and ideas treated in the novels. My in-depth analysis revealed nine thematic links among the books included in the study. An examination of these textual links revealed the kinds of nonmainstream adolescent concerns that are being treated in young adult multicultural literature. The third issue, referred to as the implications of multicultural fiction, considers the potential of literature to engage students in a personal exploration of the theme of cultural identity. This study's discussion of the opportunities provided by literature offers insight into how multicultural books may help readers to better understand marginalized issues of race, class, and gender, and more importantly, to see how these issues connect to their own lives.

Conclusions

Two Major Approaches to the Theme of Cultural Identity

The thematic content of the books included in this study articulates a vision of cultural identity that is quite different from that found in most fiction for young people. All of the books contain unique portrayals of multicultural social experience. The multifaceted nature of the concept of cultural identity, however, enables it to receive a diverse and varied treatment in literary texts. Although the nine young adult novels used in the analysis explore many similar concepts and ideas there are important differences in the way that the novels approach the theme of cultural identity. From my analysis of the nine books two major approaches emerged from the texts, with several books combining aspects of both approaches. The first approach to the theme of cultural identity deals with the experience of being caught between two

cultural worlds. Characters like Stacy Palmer and Sunita Sen struggle to balance the attitudes, values, and beliefs of their ethnic/racial group with those of the dominant culture. In their efforts to be a part of both cultural worlds the characters experience the inevitable tensions that arise when the attitudes, values, and beliefs of one culture are at odds, or at least different from, those of the other. Relationships between friends, family members, and love interests are often used as a means of exploring conflicts between cultural viewpoints. The characters in these novels often feel torn between the two cultural influences in their life and seek to resolve their dilemmas by finding a form of intercultural understanding. The majority of the novels that approached the issue of cultural identity from the perspective of two different cultures did not advocate one culture as being superior to another, choosing instead to focus on the desirability of incorporating aspects of both cultures into the individual character's cultural identity. Thus the character's exploration of his or her cultural identity resulted in an enhanced understanding of the positive aspects of his or her racial or ethnic group as well as those of the dominant culture. My analysis of the experience of being caught between two cultural worlds reveals insights similar to those found in Cai's (1992) study of the theme of acculturation as it is presented in three Lawrence Yep novels. Both studies found that the basic assumption underlying the books included in the analysis is that the process of achieving intercultural understanding is a two way street. Cai's analysis addresses the tensions that arise as a result of participation in two cultures. However, although the characters in Yep's novels experience difficulties in their attempt to reconcile the different cultural influences in their lives, ultimately they are able to achieve a strong cultural identity that has ties to both their ethnic culture and mainstream culture. The way out of the dilemma of being caught between two cultural worlds is to find a way to benefit from both cultures. The intercultural understanding that is reached by many of the characters in the novels represents the kind of adaptation that is necessary for survival in the face of contemporary reality. Central to this approach to the theme of cultural identity is that neither culture should be sacrificed in favor of the other. The assumption underlying Cai's and my analysis of the theme of acculturation is that participation in two cultures is not accompanied by a weakening of ethnic identity. In contrast to cultural assimilation which requires an exclusive identification with mainstream culture, acculturation is a two-dimensional process that recognizes ethnic group members' relationships with both their own and mainstream culture. The characters in the novels under study gain understanding and maturity by learning to recognize the value that can be found in

both cultures. This between two worlds approach to identity effectively resists singular definitions of cultural identity, recognizing instead the need for a flexible sense of self that is able to assume the best of both cultural worlds.

The second major approach to the theme of cultural identity deals with the importance of learning about the values, attitudes, and beliefs of one's cultural heritage, and acquiring an appreciation of how culture influences identity. The characters in the books that used this approach underwent a process of self-discovery that enabled them to connect with different aspects of their cultural heritage. Danny Lynx's process of discovery in *Silent Words* provides him with an awareness of what it means to be a Native person that he did not have before. And for characters like Seepeetza in *My Name is Seepeetza* and Amana in *The Ceremony of Innocence*, the process of self-discovery is one which seeks to affirm their commitment to the Indian way of life. Both characters struggle to preserve their cultural identity against the forces that seek to undermine it. The effectiveness of this approach to the theme of cultural identity is that it invites the reader to learn about the specific attitudes, values, and beliefs of a given culture along with the main character (s). The reader works at understanding the impact of these things on identity in the same way that the characters do. The strange and unfamiliar qualities of another culture became more accessible as the reader learns through the world of the novel how coming to terms with one's identity can help individuals cope in specific cultural and social contexts. This approach's concern with presenting the reader with specific expressions of a culture's beliefs and values helps readers to understand different cultural horizons more expertly than before.

Common Multicultural Themes

Each of the nine novels included in this analysis offers a unique expression of the theme of cultural identity. Despite the infinite variations that exist between the novels' articulation of a particular concept of identity the books share many common themes and ideas. The purpose in drawing attention to the common themes explored in this study is to find the bridges between multicultural social experience as it is lived, has been lived, and might be lived by young adults from diverse cultural backgrounds. By identifying the major issues and concerns expressed in young adult multicultural fiction, parents and educators will be better able to choose books that encourage readers to discover the intimate relationship

between their personal lives and their responses to literature. The following is a discussion of the texts' major thematic links.

Maintaining one's integrity in the face of adversity.

Refusing to allow one's self respect to be compromised by others is a theme that echoes throughout many of the novels under study. In *Hold Fast to Dreams* Deirdre's father's decision to not let himself be intimidated by a racist security guard encourages Deirdre and her sister to defend their integrity by standing up to the people who show them disrespect. Similarly, in *Yoruba Girl Dancing* Remi seeks to defend her country's reputation by challenging the inaccurate information that she receives about Africa at her English boarding school. Although standing up for her country costs Remi her teachers' approval she feels justified in protesting what she knows to be an unfair representation of her homeland. In *Thief of Hearts* Stacy Palmer also encounters adversity when she resolves to prove that Hong Ch'un is innocent of theft. Stacy's commitment to truth and fairness allows her to stand up to friends who dislike Hong Ch'un because of her unfamiliar Chinese attitudes and behavior. The situations encountered by these characters require them to make choices about how they are going to allow themselves to be treated. Each of the characters is subjected to unfair treatment that impels him or her to assert integrity. The novels' treatment of this theme is significant because it provides readers with a model of social action for addressing problems. Ultimately, the characters in these novels do not run away from the challenges that they encounter, but instead make a conscious decision to confront them head on.

The influence of history on characters' attitudes towards their cultural heritage.

Each novel is a world inhabited by characters for which the past informs the present. When Stacy learns in *Thief of Hearts* how the immigration laws in America discriminated against Asians by affording them few opportunities for success, Stacy begins to understand how her mother's underprivileged childhood has shaped her strong work ethic and her determination that Stacy do well in school. African American social history has a significant influence on the lives of the characters in *Fast Talk on a Slow Track*. Denzel's refusal to consider the influence of his cultural heritage on his life hinders his understanding of how the past has shaped the way his father sees the present day problems and challenges facing African Americans. In both of these novels knowledge of the past helps the younger generation to understand and appreciate traditional values, and also to understand why they are who they are. Both Stacy

and Denzel reach a greater understanding of their family's present situation by learning about how the social realities of their parents' generation affected the kinds of choices that their parents were able to make. Learning about the past however does not mean to believe in everything that is passed down. Denzel discovers that he can make his cultural heritage part of his life without embracing the same lifestyle that his father did. In *Saying Goodbye* Ellen Sung makes a similar realization about the place of Korean culture in her life. Ellen discovers that she need not try to forget her Korean culture like her parents did, nor embrace it to the exclusion of everything else like her friend Leecia. Instead of placing one culture over the other Ellen finds that she can enjoy learning about the Korean past while at the same time maintain her interest in people and activities that exist apart from her ethnic group. The characters in these novels are invested with the power to choose. Stacy, Denzel, and Ellen discover that they can take the values and traditions from their cultural heritage that are meaningful to them, and use them to enrich their present reality.

Confronting pressures to conform to mainstream society.

The experience of feeling different from those around you is the theme that is most prevalent in the novels included in this analysis. Many of the characters struggle with the desire to be like everyone else, while at the same time they wish to preserve the cultural values and beliefs that are an integral part of their identity. When Remi discovers that she is the only Black student at her school she resents being singled out because she is African. Although Remi does not want to forget her family or her happy childhood in Africa, she also does not want to be thought of as different. Sunita Sen in *The Sunita Experiment* experiences similar feelings of insecurity when her grandparents come from India to stay with Sunita and her family. Afraid that her friends will laugh at her grandparent's Indian clothing and behavior Sunita tries to hide her family's cultural background. Sunita's dread of being considered different from everyone else leads her to feel embarrassed about family members whom she loves and respects. Both Remi and Sunita are torn between their pride in their cultural identity and their fear of being ostracized by others because they have a different cultural background. In addressing Remi and Sunita's fears about being singled out, the novels show that although it is sometimes hard to be different it is also undesirable to pretend to be like everyone else at the expense of one's personal identity. In *The Ceremony of Innocence* Amana tries to reconcile herself to Jean-Pierre's attempts to transform her into a white woman so that he

will want to stay with her. Although Amana is pained by what she perceives to be the loss of her Indian identity she compromises her Indian culture so that she will be accepted in White society. However, Amana's decision to embrace a European lifestyle brings her great sorrow instead of the happiness that she desires. For Remi, Sunita, and Amana personal happiness and fulfillment are not achieved at the expense of cultural identity. The social insight that arises from these novels is that true self-respect is not found through cultural assimilation but from coming to terms with who you are and where you come from.

The importance of community.

The feeling of comfort and security that comes from feeling a part of something larger than oneself is an important experience for many of the characters in the novels under study. In *Hold Fast to Dreams* Deirdre longs for the African American community that she had in Baltimore. Living in an all white neighborhood and attending a school where she is one of the only Black students becomes a tremendously isolating experience for Deirdre. Without the support of her community Deirdre must find new ways to strengthen her self-esteem and to confront the challenges that she encounters in the new environment. The notion of community as an important source of cultural and emotional support is also explored in *Silent Words*. For Danny Lynx the Native community has a healing effect by giving him a sense of belonging. The time that Danny spends in the different Native communities that he encounters on his journey teaches him about Native history, beliefs, and values. In *Thief of Hearts* the Chinatown community is presented as a kind of cultural fortress that protects the Chinese traditional heritage. Stacy's visit to Chinatown helps her to understand her mother and great-grandmother's strong connections to their Chinese identity. The opportunity to revisit the people and places of the past with her family provides Stacy with a sense of what it means to have a cultural home.

Each of the novels recognizes the importance of establishing relationships and making connections with people who share similar cultural beliefs and attitudes. The sense of alienation that is experienced by individual characters is lessened when he or she realizes that they are not alone. Russel's (1990) analysis of the African American experience in *M. C. Higgins, The Great* also finds the main character learning that his quest for identity is not an individual plight, and that success depends on people striving together. Sim's (1982) study of African American children's literature speaks of a "traditional awareness of the ties that bind disparate members of African-American families and communities together" (p. 70). Sim's

analysis found that culturally conscious fiction portrayed familial and communal ties that are more deep and lasting than the communal relationships typical of white society. Cai (1992) also points out how Lawrence Yep's portrayal of Chinatown is an example of a community whose past traditions and values continue to nurture and support contemporary Chinese culture.

The relationship between language and cultural membership.

The sense of connection that a particular character feels towards his or her cultural identity is often influenced by his or her ability to communicate with people who share the same cultural background. The novels under study point out both the positive and negative ways in which language is perceived by different characters. Although many of the novels portray language as something that enhances a character's understanding of cultural identity, several characters express the fear that speaking a foreign language will prove detrimental to their ability to be successful in mainstream society. In *Saying Goodbye* Ellen Sung feels like an outsider in her own culture because she cannot speak Korean. Once she begins to learn the Korean language Ellen's ability to identify with her cultural heritage increases. Similarly, Stacy Palmer feels left out when she hears her mother and great-grandmother speaking Chinese. Stacy believes that because she can only speak English she will never be able to participate in any aspect of Chinese culture. However, as Stacy becomes acquainted with more Chinese people, many of whom speak different dialects, she learns that even language barriers can be overcome if one cares enough about communicating with someone else.

In *My Name is Seepeetza*, the Indian language is denied to Seepeetza for her own protection. Seepeetza's mother decides not to teach her children Indian so that they will not be abused at the residential school the way that she was for speaking in her native tongue. The negative implications of speaking a different language are also explored in *Saying Goodbye* when Ellen recalls her father reproaching her mother for teaching her the Korean word for milk. Ellen's father did not want her to learn to speak Korean because he was afraid that it would accent her English and set Ellen apart from the other children at school. The different perspectives on language explored in these novels invest language with the power to enable as well as the power to harm. An important insight arising from the books' treatment of the relationship between language and cultural membership is the idea that language differences are not insurmountable obstacles to meaningful communication.

Prejudice and discrimination.

The pain of prejudice and discrimination is experienced in varying degrees by all of the main characters in the novels under study. Although many of the books choose to focus on how people of color experience racism, several of the novels also point out how prejudicial attitudes towards white people or towards people of mixed racial heritage negatively affect relationships between people. In *Hold Fast to Dreams* Deirdre and her sister experience similar treatment at school when they are teased by some of the other students because they look different. In *Yoruba Girl Dancing* Remi must endure not only the fear and suspicion that is directed against her by her classmates, but the racist attitudes of teachers as well. Frequently the only Black student at her school Remi tries to battle the African stereotypes that are constantly being thrust upon her. School-life is also a source of anxiety for Seepetza who is forced to go to a residential school far away from home because she is an Indian. At the residential school Seepetza's Indian and Irish heritage earns her a double dose of cruel treatment: the sisters are unkind to her because she is an Indian, and some of the other students bully her because she looks like a white person.

Fast Talk on a Slow Track takes a different approach to race relations, pointing out the kinds of racist attitudes that are directed against white people. Denzel is dismayed when his father reproaches him for wasting his time on friendship with a white girl. Denzel's father's view of white women reduces them to something less than human. Denzel's father is only able to see white women as a prize, a kind of trophy to be won and then discarded. Listening to his father's prejudiced remarks about his friend causes Denzel to reflect on his own feelings about white people and how these feelings affect his relationships with others. Regardless of which side of racial injustice the characters find themselves on, acts of prejudice and discrimination are presented in the novels as things that must be challenged at all costs. Arising from ignorance and misunderstanding, the books point out how judging people on the basis of race or ethnicity puts obstacles in the way of intercultural understanding.

Self-consciousness about appearance.

Although physical attractiveness is an important theme in most fiction for young people, the role of appearance in a young adult's life takes on even greater significance in multicultural literature. In addition to the common desire to be perceived as attractive by one's peers, a young person of color experiences anxiety over his or her inability to fit into mainstream society's ideal of physical attractiveness.

In *Yaruba Girl Dancing* Remi longs to look like the movie stars that represent British society's ideal of beauty. Because her appearance is different from what is celebrated in popular culture Remi feels ugly when she compares her African features to those of the white movie stars she admires. Likewise, in *The Sunita Experiment* Sunita wishes that her skin wasn't so dark so that she would be able to resemble more closely Ingrid Bergman. What both of the characters have in common are their insecurities about looking different from a white ideal of beauty. With so few role models from their own culture to emulate, Remi and Sunita strive to conform to mainstream society's standards of physical attractiveness.

Another challenge faced by adolescents of color is being discriminated against because they look different. In *My Name is Seepetza* Seepetza worries that she will never have any friends because the Indian children dislike her because she looks white and the white children won't play with her because she is an Indian. Jemina confronts a similar problem in *The Ceremony of Innocence* when she fears that because she is part Indian she will be rejected by white society. In an effort to hide her Indian heritage Jemina tries to copy European women's dress and manners. The kinds of fears and insecurities that are experienced by the nonmainstream adolescents in these novels points to a lack of diversity and acceptance in mainstream society. The scarcity of multicultural role models in popular culture accompanied by an unwillingness to accept people who are of mixed racial or ethnic heritage cause nonmainstream adolescents to feel alienated from their peers. The characters that experience these kinds of feelings learn to restore their self-esteem by developing a sense of pride and confidence in looking different.

Institutional racism.

In addition to the overt acts of prejudice and discrimination that occur within the pages of these novels, many of the books address the more subtle forms of racism that exist in contemporary society. Educational institutions and the workplace continue to foster prejudice and to deny people of color equal opportunity. In *Hold Fast to Dreams* Deirdre's father feels that as a Black man he must work harder than everyone else to prove to his employers that he is worthy of his promotion. The security guard's attempt to intimidate Deirdre's father by asking to see his identification is indicative of the kind of resentment that is directed towards African Americans who have achieved high status positions.

Injustices in the education system are explored in *The Ceremony of Innocence*, a novel that reveals the poor quality of education offered to Indian children in the 1950's. Amana refuses to send her daughter

to a residential school where the students are taught how to be white people's servants instead of learning how to read and write. In *Yoruba Girl Dancing* Remi also experiences the pain of discrimination. In spite of an excellent academic record Remi is refused a place at the school of her choice because the college examiners assume that her grasp of the English language must be inferior because she is African.

In all of the instances of institutional racism described in these books, inequitable education or employment policies are responsible for the injustices experienced by the characters. By exploring the inequities that exist or have existed in various institutions, the novels sensitively expose how the more subtle forms of racism affect nonmainstream social experience.

Cultural pride.

Despite all of the challenges and hardships confronted by the characters that breathe life into the nine novels under study, cultural pride is a quality that all of the characters acquire. Seepeetza never loses sight of her love for the Indian way of life despite the residential school's repeated attempts to undermine her Indian identity. Even though she is far from her home and family Seepeetza continues to embrace the values of the Indian community. Similarly, throughout *The Ceremony of Innocence* Amana struggles to keep Indian values and practices alive. Although Amana experiences much pain and suffering because she is an Indian woman, she never loses pride in her Indian heritage.

For some of the characters cultural pride is something that they gain as a result of the difficult experiences that they endure. The friendships that Remi forms with other African students in *Yoruba Girl Dancing* allow her to revel in the fact that she is different for the first time in her life. Released from the pressures of trying to pretend that she is English Remi is able to enjoy her cultural heritage and all of the friends and family that it brings her closer to. Sunita experiences a similar sense of freedom in *The Sunita Experiment* when she finally overcomes her embarrassment over being thought of as different and learns to take pride in her family's Indian culture.

Underlying the many journeys of self-discovery described in these novels is the belief that culture is both strong and resilient. For the characters who embrace their cultural heritage and for those who are discovering it for the first time, cultural identity exerts a powerful influence on their lives and offers them the possibility of greater self-awareness and understanding.

The Implications of Multicultural Fiction for Engaging Students in a Personal Exploration of Literature

The introduction to this study extolled the power of literature to encourage nonmainstream students to engage in a personal exploration of issues critical to their lives. My analysis of the thematic content of the books included in this study provides a discovery frame for learning about such abstract concepts as identity, culture, and communication. The novels' approach to the theme of cultural identity reveals the importance of resisting a singular definition of ethnic identity. As Schuller (1993) points out, the danger of theorizing about multicultural groups is actually that of inscribing an essential ethnicity. For the nonmainstream writer, who is often the subject of singular definition, the questioning of oppositions and the resistance to definitions is a means of liberation. Although race and ethnicity are important to many nonmainstream writers, it is undesirable for them to become transcendent and true categories. The books included in this analysis deny universality and absolute values by representing multicultural experience as so diverse that it resists generalization. Through encounters with this kind of literature readers see reflections of a broader society. The themes and ideas addressed by these books are rarely treated in books for young people. In examining issues related to the intersection of race, class, and gender, multicultural literature brings to light subject matter that until recently has been either marginalized or excluded from the literature classroom. The books included in this analysis sensitively explore the relationships between nonmainstream culture and the outside world, between contemporary life and the traditional values, and between people of color and mainstream white Americans/Canadians. An analysis of the problems and challenges inherent in these relationships, as they are reflected in the novels, may help readers to better understand the issue of cultural identity as it relates to their own lives. Strong potential exists for a meaningful relationship between multicultural literature and mainstream and nonmainstream students alike. For mainstream students multicultural literature can engage them in lives and experiences different from their own, while for nonmainstream students multicultural literature can serve as a mirror reflecting themselves and their cultural values and beliefs. Fundamental to this study's discussion of literature as exploration is the conviction that all students need both kinds of literary experiences.

Teaching Implications

Although the purpose of this study has not been to set out prescriptive methods for teaching multicultural fiction in the classroom, several theoretical implications for the teaching of literature emerged from my analysis. The rich and diverse thematic content revealed in the books included in this study offers many new insights into how to look at literature. This thesis's focus on cultural identity and its relationship to issues of race, class, and gender explore themes and ideas that are rarely treated in young adult fiction. An awareness of the cultural content of fiction for young people as well as its aesthetic qualities can increase literature's potential to enhance students' understanding of the world. Returning to Rosenblatt's (1976) theory of literature as exploration, multicultural fiction adds a new dimension to teaching by providing readers with opportunities to develop curiosity about other cultures, other people. According to Dasenbrock (1992) the way to foster this kind of interest in other cultures through literature is to break with the assumption that the correct way to approach a text is from the position of possession, the position of expert. The form of analysis used in this study follows Dasenbrock's theory in that it requires little previous knowledge on the part of the reader to apprehend what is being communicated in each text. All that is required to enhance understanding is a willingness to open oneself to the possibility of learning. The implication of this form of analysis for teaching is that it re-describes the scene of reading, not as a demonstration of the knowledge already in place, but as a scene of learning (Dasenbrock, p. 39). This model of literary criticism and of reading differs from many of their predecessors in terms of emphasis. Instead of maintaining expertise as the prerequisite for interpreting a particular work, Dasenbrock's (and my) model of interpretation requires only that the reader possess the desire to know more about a particular text than he or she did before. The significance of valuing learning above expertise in relation to literary texts is that it helps to resolve the dilemma faced by educators who feel that they cannot bring multicultural literature into the classroom because they do not know enough about other cultures to be able to teach it. When we remove the pressure placed on teachers to be experts in every field of literature the possibility for learning and exploration becomes greater. By reading a wide variety of multicultural texts, and encouraging students to do the same, both teachers and students will acquire the knowledge necessary to interpret a text from another culture. As Sandra Jamieson (1992) points out, the benefit of this kind of

pedagogy for students is that it “encourages them to take a more interactive approach to reading and engaging in cultural studies because their own reading both reveals what they need to learn and provides a purpose for learning it” (p. 151). The effect of removing the expert label from teachers of literature is that it will allow them to find new ways to connect students to literature that is meaningful to them. By redefining the teacher’s role as resource person instead of expert, literature class need not be used exclusively as a means to impart expert knowledge about a particular text. More opportunities can be provided for students to choose their own books. At a time when the increasing diversity in classrooms makes the use of whole class texts more difficult teachers need to find new ways to encourage students to engage in literary experiences that recognize their interests and culture.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although there is still a paucity of multicultural texts being used in classrooms across Canada and the United States, the field of multicultural literature is receiving more and more attention from educators and literary theorists. As society continues to become more ethnically diverse the demand for educational materials that reflect multicultural experience will increase. In addition to developing methods of evaluating multicultural texts, schools need to develop classroom practices that encourage students to experience the act of reading as a means of discovery. Studies that focus on helping readers to discover new ways of responding to literature have the potential to provide students with more meaningful reading experiences. Teachers of literature need to develop strategies for exploring literature that move away from vague generalizations and the emotional detachment that comes from merely identifying and criticizing the development of character, plot, setting, style, and tone. In terms of cross-cultural studies in literature educators need to find better ways to deal with the gaps between readers, texts, and cultures. Developing methods of textual response that encourage readers of multicultural literature to discover that they are not so much talking to the “other,” as they are to parts of themselves that remain unexplored, is an important step towards enabling students to see relationships between literature and their own lives.

In recommending further research I believe that the kind of work being done by Hansen-Krening and Mizokawa (1997) is important because it is research that seeks to inform classroom practice. The

implementation of literature circles in classrooms creates context for conversations about multicultural fiction. By providing parents and educators with opportunities to discuss the literature they are reading Hansen-Krening and Mizokawa are helping readers to discover their own attitudes and the influence these have on their responses to literature. Studies that involve educators as well as teachers are valuable because they are more likely to increase educators' willingness to bring multicultural literature into the classroom. Although there are a growing number of bibliographies of multicultural titles being published there are fewer studies being done on how to actually use multicultural literature with different students. Providing students with opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions about the books that they read, and encouraging them to reflect on the social insights they gain from reading, are aspects of literature instruction that have not yet been fully developed. Studies that examine the use of books in relation to teachers and students are more likely to enhance our understanding of nonmainstream voices, as well as our ability to make those voices heard in literature classrooms.

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Appendix A

Preliminary List of Young Adult Multicultural Fiction Titles

African American

- Bedford, S. (1991). *Ycruba Girl Dancing*. London: Heinemann.
- Pinkney, A. D. (1996). *Hold Fast to Dreams*. New York: Hyperion.
- Shange, N. (1985). *Betsey Brown*. London: Methuen.
- Wesley, V. W. (1993). *Where Do I Go From Here?* New York: Scholastic.
- Williams-Garcia, R. (1991). *Fast Talk on a Slow Track*. New York: Dutton.
- Yarbrough, C. (1989). *Shimmershine Queens*. New York: G. P. Putnam's.

Asian American

- Chin, F. (1991). *Donald Duk*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.
- Fae Myenne, N. (1991). *Bone*. New York: Hyperion.
- Gish, J. (1991). *Typical American*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Lee, M., G. (1992). *Finding My Voice*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Lee, M., G. (1994). *Saying Goodbye*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Perkins, M. (1993). *The Sunita Experiment*. New York: Hyperion.
- Pettit, J. (1992). *My Name is San Ho*. New York: Scholastic.
- Yep, Lawrence. (1995). *Thief of Hearts*. New York: Harper Trophy.

Native American

- Grutman, J.H and Matthae, G. (1995). *The ledgerbook of Thomas Blue Eagle*.
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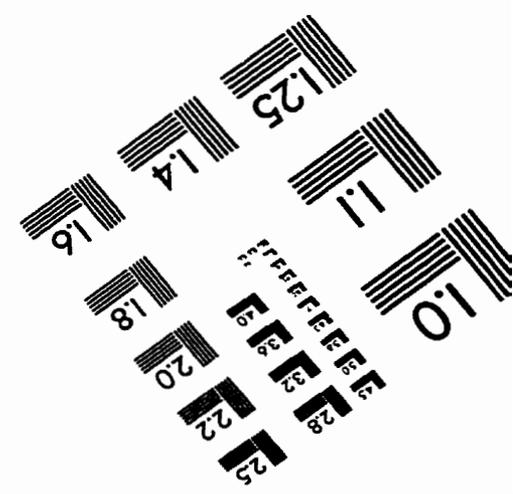
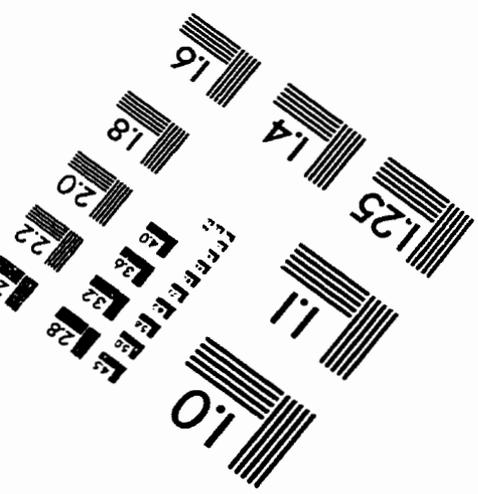
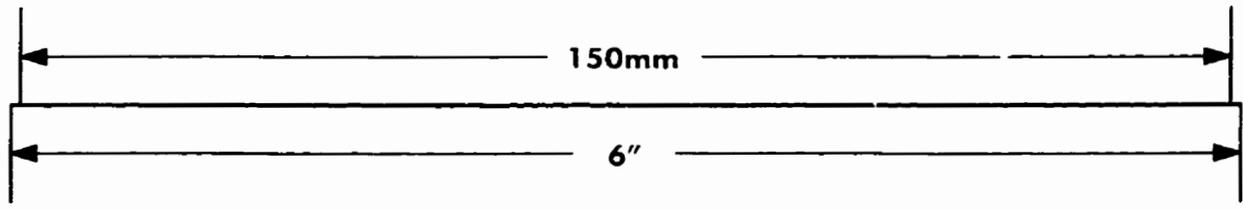
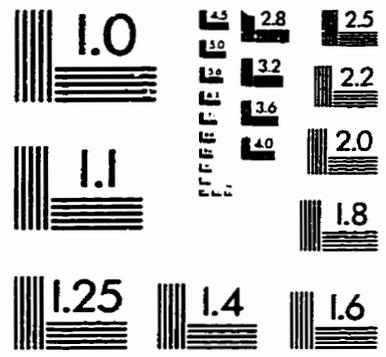
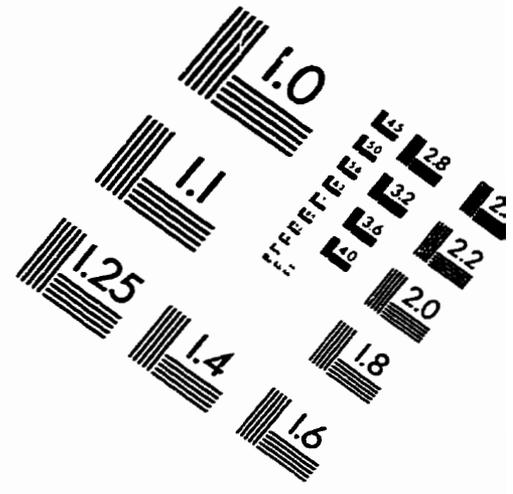
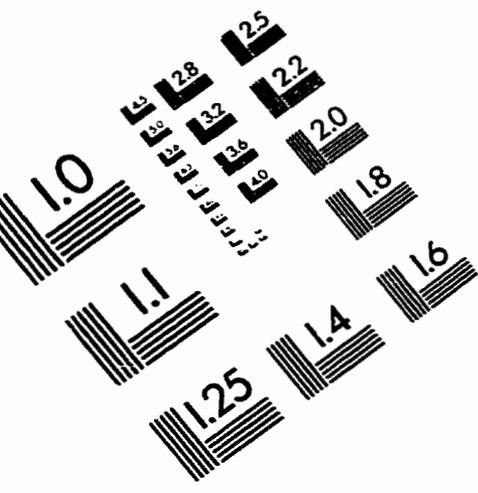
Meyer, C. (1992). *Where the Broken Heart Still Beats*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace

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Slipperjack, R. (1992). *Silent Words*. Saskatoon: Fifth House.

Sterling, S. (1992). *My Name is Seepeetza*. Toronto: Groundwood Books.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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