

Student work:

1. Essential question essay:

The Creation of Manny Hernandez

Victor Martinez' autobiographical novel *Parrot in the Oven* provides an excellent example of the use of writing strategies to create a character. In this coming of age novel, the author uses action, dialogue and interior monologue to create a believable character in Manny Hernandez, a character who is not cardboard but rather many-sided. Manny's dominant characteristics, both positive and negative, are quite contradictory, reinforcing the author's creation of a very believable character. Manny is aggressive while shy, determined, goal-driven, hard-working, caring, stubborn, while responsible. To make a more realistic perception of the main character, the author tells several stories that show Manny's growth and development as a young man. Most of the stories take place in urban Fresno, where Manny lives alone with his mom, his rarely sober dad, Magda, his older sister, Nardo, his older brother, and Pedi, his younger sister. Living a life of constant survival in the ruthless neighborhood of the barrio, Manny encounters many trials and tribulations. From wanting a baseball glove to joining a gang, this story tells of Manny's path replete with experiences and events. As the story progresses, Manny is slowly and gradually stripped of his childhood innocence, forcing him to become an adult.

In creating a believable character, Victor Martinez was able to successfully describe what seems like a real human being, full of emotions and actions. At the beginning of the story Manny has the goal of buying a baseball glove and to achieve that goal he goes to pick chilies. After working for hours in the scorching afternoon Californian sun, he is able to pick enough chilies to buy himself a baseball glove. This reveals that Manny is very goal-driven and determined. Rather than dwelling on and sitting on his goals, Manny is willing to work in order to achieve them. Later on in the story, his dad is enraged and wants to shoot Manny's mom for embarrassing him in front of his friends. After taking out his rifle, his dad looks for bullets. Drunk and stumbling, his dad knocks over numerous decorations and knick-knacks in the house. Overflowing with composure

and calm, Manny follows his father around the house picking up everything thrown aside. This vividly demonstrates his strong sense of responsibility and his care for the house and his family. One day Manny meets a girl at the local pharmacy and is invited by her dad to go to her birthday party. Knowing that he is not wanted there, Manny is compelled to go and does. At the party people make fun of him and he escapes the humiliation by scurrying away like a little mouse. This strikingly shows that he is as stubborn as a metal pole. Towards the end of the story, Manny's lusty desire to kiss a girl gets him in trouble. Manny is invited to join a local gang formed by kids from the barrio. In order to join the gang, Manny has to be initiated, or, in other words, beat up, but afterwards he gets the sacred privilege to kiss a girl. Undiscerning about the physical punishment of joining the gang, Manny allows himself to get beat up in order to kiss a girl. The indicated glaringly exposes his strong eagerness to be involved with girls.

To fortify the author's creation of a believable character, Victor Martinez uses creative dialogue that shows Manny's interaction with other characters. In the story when Manny is being switched to another school, he says, "...just a dream of my mom's, another one that probably wasn't going to hatch." (47) The aforementioned expresses a reluctant attitude toward having a better life than his parents. It shows that he lacks the drive for a better life and that this is not one of his goals. Because of his socio-economic status, he has no hope of a better life. In his mind, he is stuck in the barrio just like everyone else. When Manny's dad is about to shoot his mom, Manny says to him, "But Dad, if you shoot mom, they'll only throw you in jail. Then what will happen to us?" (56) "I don't care what happens to you," his dad clips. (56) In this circumstance Manny is taking responsibility for the family; he is becoming an adult because he has to. And when his dad responds, he is left with a painful rejection, part of his childhood innocence painfully taken away.

Since Manny is the narrator and the main character in this book, there is extensive use of interior monologue by the author. The interior monologue reveals many things about Manny. It presents the emotions and thoughts of Manny in a truthful and sincere way for it is what Manny is thinking and feeling himself. It also brings out the values and morals

Manny holds true and the kind of person he is. For example, in the beginning of the book, Manny says as the narrator, "I suppose years of not knowing what besides work was expected from a Mexican convinced me that I wouldn't pass from this earth without putting in a lot of days." (6) This confirms from the words of the man himself that Manny is a determined, dedicated worker. It shows that it is what Manny believes is the right thing to do; that it is something engraved deeply in his heart. While Manny is working in the chili fields to earn enough money to buy a baseball glove, the INS comes to capture all the illegal immigrants also working in the fields. As the INS vans approach, all the illegal immigrants drop what they are doing and run in the direction opposite from the vans. But within the cloud of scurrying immigrants, runs a man who is a legal citizen, a man named Joe. This is a man proud to be Mexican and caught up in the excitement of the moment, a man Manny admires, which demonstrates Manny's exuberant pride in being Mexican and his profound admiration for people who help others. It shows that he treasures people rather than look down on them. Towards the end of the book, Manny becomes both an equipment manager and a trainer for one of the fighters in the upcoming school boxing match, a match much anticipated and the subject of every conversation. When the fight ends, the fighter Manny works with is the loser and everyone in the school looks down on him. It is then that Manny has an epiphany, "I suddenly realized that the whole fight shouldn't have been given so much meaning," (138) This is when he recognizes that he has made a mistake for being involved and caught up in the hype. Because of this, he gains wisdom and matures a step further. At the end of the book, Manny returns home and says, "And it was wondrous, like a place I was meant to be," (215) This shows that he comprehends, only after the journey that he has taken a journey dominated by terrible and miserable experiences, that this is where he was meant to be. This is his home.

This book provides an excellent example of the use of writing strategies to relate a believable character. In using action, dialogue, and interior monologue, the author was able to successfully create a believable character, one who is dominated by emotions and who has morals and beliefs. He has used the three writing strategies in a way that they reinforce each other in creating a believable character, a character filled with emotions

and ideas. One thing that makes it easy to believe that Manny is a real person is the familiar experience he encounters and the journey he takes, the amazing journey in which Manny goes from wanting a baseball glove to joining a gang. It also is easy to believe Manny is real because his personality is so contradictory and so complex. He is aggressive while shy and stubborn while responsible. He is rejected by his father but still loyal. Overall, Victor Martinez did a superb job of creating a real and believable character. A character so real that one would think *Parrot in the Oven* is the life story of Victor Martinez.