

Who are we?: The Impact of Literature and Language on an Individual's Identity

Who are we? Humans are identified by many words; mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, children, lawyers, doctors, singers, writers, etc. However, is that all we are? The truth is that language and literature play a big role in an individual's identity.

Reading has the power to reshape an individual's worldview, broadening their understanding of both their surroundings and the varied experiences of others. Matt de la Peña illustrates this transformation through his experience with his father. Initially, his father viewed reading for pleasure as a sign of weakness, believing that “Guys who read books— especially for pleasure— were soft. Sensitive. And if there was one thing a guy couldn't be in my *machista*, Mexican family, it was sensitive. My old man didn't play that.” (de la Peña 1). However, after his father read *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, his outlook shifted dramatically. Over the next couple of years, he eagerly consumed everything his son recommended—fiction, nonfiction, essays, and plays. He even began exploring books on his own. de la Peña's mother noted the profound change in his father, remarking that he was becoming a different person: “He was less angry now. He even talked about going back to school” (de la Peña 3).

Malcolm X serves as another powerful example of how reading can profoundly alter one's perspective. He expressed his shock upon discovering the brutal realities of slavery, recalling, “I will never forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery's total horror... I read descriptions of atrocities, saw those illustrations of black slave women tied up and flogged with whips; of black mothers watching their babies being dragged off, never to be seen by their mothers again; of dogs after slaves, and of the fugitive slave catchers, evil white men with whips and clubs and chains and guns...” (X 20).

Through engaging with these narratives, individuals gain deeper insights and broaden their understanding of the world, allowing them to view events and experiences from multiple angles. This heightened awareness not only enriches their appreciation for life's complexities but also nurtures empathy, critical thinking, and a more sophisticated grasp of societal challenges.

Reading can also have an intellectual and emotional impact in a person's journey to self-discovery. Matt de la Pena highlights the emotional aspects when illustrating his personal experiences when reading a book all the way through. "By chapter 50 or so, I started caring about the character. She had a really tough life, far tougher than anything I'd experienced, and I tried to put myself in her shoes. The broken English, which seemed awkward at first, became poetic. I read a third of the book that night and went to sleep... First of all, I'd never read a book in two days, and it made me feel smart (an important piece of the puzzle). Even more surprisingly, though, when I turned the last page, I found myself on the verge of tears. I was shocked. How could black and white on a page make me feel so emotional? I was a tough kid from a tough family. I hadn't shed a tear since elementary school. And here I was, choked up. From a book" (Matt de la Pena 2). This excerpt captures a profound moment of connection between de la Pena and the narrative, illustrating how literature can transcend mere words on a page to evoke deep emotional responses. The transformation from indifference to empathy as he engages with the character's struggles reveals the power of storytelling to foster understanding and compassion.

De la Pena's initial struggle with the character's broken English reflects a common barrier in reading, where unfamiliarity can create distance. However, as the narrative unfolds, this language barrier becomes a source of beauty rather than a hindrance, highlighting how reading can shift our perceptions and allow us to appreciate diverse voices and experiences.

The mention of reading a book in just two days signifies a milestone in Matt de la Pena's journey, marking a newfound confidence and intellectual engagement. This sense of achievement is significant, particularly for someone who identifies as tough and emotionally reserved. The unexpected tears at the end of the book illustrate the vulnerability that literature can elicit, challenging his self-image and demonstrating that even the most hardened individuals can be touched by the experiences of others.

On the other hand, Malcolm X's journey focuses on the intellectual impact literature has in an individual's identity. "I spent two days just riffling uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know which words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying. In my slow, painstaking, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks. I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting. I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words—immensely proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meanings I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now, that "aardvark" springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants" (Malcolm X). This passage from Malcolm X powerfully illustrates how literature, particularly through the medium of a dictionary, can significantly shape an individual's intellectual identity. His initial experience of riffling through the dictionary reveals both

uncertainty and a burgeoning curiosity. The sheer abundance of words signifies not only the richness of language but also the potential for personal growth and understanding.

By taking the initiative to copy down the words, Malcolm X engages in an active process of learning. This act of writing serves as a bridge between passive consumption and active participation, transforming his relationship with language. It highlights how literature—whether through dictionaries, novels, or any written material—can serve as a foundational tool for intellectual development. The painstaking process of handwriting reinforces his commitment to learning, demonstrating that the journey of education is often gradual and requires effort.

His pride in having written down words he had never encountered before reflects a pivotal moment in the formation of his intellectual identity. This realization that knowledge is within his grasp can be deeply empowering, fostering a sense of agency and self-efficacy. As he revisits the words and begins to internalize their meanings, he not only expands his vocabulary but also cultivates a deeper understanding of the world around him.

The specific memory of the word "aardvark" symbolizes the lasting impact that literature can have; it becomes a memorable touchstone in his learning journey. This highlights how literature is not merely a collection of facts or words but a source of connection and insight that can resonate long after the initial encounter.

Overall, reading and language significantly influence an individual's journey of self-discovery across various dimensions—intellectual, emotional, and perceptual. Engaging with written words not only enhances knowledge and understanding but also fosters emotional growth and empathy. Through literature, individuals can explore diverse perspectives, shaping their viewpoints and enriching their sense of identity. This multifaceted impact highlights how the written word serves

as a vital tool for personal development and deeper self-awareness. Whether we become mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, children, lawyers, doctors, singers, writers... the impact that literature and language have on us, will forever stick with the way we think and see the world.