

The American culture that raises Henry Lee ultimately enables him to transcend his father's old world prejudices and become an American.

I. Major events that change Henry's development as a character

A. Acquaintance with Sheldon

- a. Henry's fascination and love of jazz music leads to his acquaintance with the sax player Sheldon.
- b. Henry's life in Seattle offered him a unique exposure to different cultures and music.
  - i. When Henry hears that the legendary Oscar Holden would be playing in Seattle, he talks with the sax player Sheldon about his big spotlight gig with the man.
  - ii. During their conversation, he mentions that his parents would be unhappy with his having a Japanese friend.
    1. Sheldon tells him, "I am Chinese. I am Lebanese. I am Pekinese. I am the ever-loving bees' knees" (Ford 28).
- c. At Oscar Holden's performance, he finds the swing jazz to be overwhelmingly powerful, describing it as a "speeding freight train" in comparison to the music that he normally hears along the South Jackson street.
- d. Henry finds himself drawn to the music, saying to Keiko, "it's so different, but people everywhere still like it, they just accept musicians, no matter what color they are." (Ford 49).
  - i. Henry finds a world in which all people are accepted by Sheldon, including himself.
    1. Since Henry is greatly impressed by the music and its unifying power, he has a common interest with the Japanese, who his father considers to be his enemy.

2. When the Japanese are arrested after the concert on suspicion of spying, Henry is forced to make the distinction that he is Chinese in order to avoid being arrested for treason.
- e. Henry's acquaintance with Sheldon helps him to gain confidence in himself.
  - i. He eventually stands up to Chaz, when he tells him to "go home" and defends himself with a broomstick (Ford 170).
    1. He recalls his past confrontations with Chaz, and yet he is not as fearful of him.
- f. As Henry's character develops, his love for music intensifies because it reminds him of a certain place where he was not constrained by his identity.
- g. Later in the book, he remembers Sheldon, and helps his passing by fixing and playing the record that was thought to be broken forever.

#### B. Meeting Keiko

- a. When Henry meets Keiko, he develops a friendship that lasts for decades.
- b. Both Henry and Keiko are forced to go to Rainier, which was considered to be unusual.
- c. When Henry first meets Keiko, he is shocked to know that she is Japanese.
  - i. She tells him in her defense, "I'm American" (Ford 20).
  - ii. Through his experiences with Keiko, Henry learns that she is a loyal American.
  - iii. When Keiko tries to buy Oscar Holden's record, the clerk refuses to serve her, and Henry shows the clerk his button.
    1. He remarks, "You'd think grown-ups would act different" (Ford 115).
      - a. This statement of his shows his loss of unconditional respect.
- d. While Henry initially saw himself as Chinese, he becomes changed by his friendship with Keiko.

- i. He is able to find the sweet among the bitter, recognizing the opportunity that going to Rainier has brought to him (Ford 154).
  - e. At first, Henry lies to Keiko and his parents about his whereabouts at the camp, but he later confesses to Keiko regarding his parents, “They don’t know” (Ford 165).
  - f. When Henry’s father plans for him to visit China to see relatives, Henry does not want to go because he feels more at home with Keiko.
  - g. He thinks that going to China is terrifying, because it is a foreign country to him, envisioning being teased for not being Chinese enough (Ford 167).
  - h. Henry’s witness to the internees’ loyalty to the United States allows him to recognize that they truly desire to be American.
- C. Exposure to the effects of World War II era nationalism.
- a. The influence of Henry’s father’s nationalism causes Henry to become more understanding.
  - b. He is both accused of not being Chinese and not being American enough.
    - i. When Henry forgets to salute the flag at his school, Chaz tells him, “Oh, that’s right, you Japs don’t salute *American* flags, do you?” (Ford 17).
    - ii. Henry notes from this experience that he was not sure whether being picked on for being Chinese or being accused of being a Jap was worse.
    - iii. He also realizes that his classmates did not make the distinction that he thought was important.
  - c. At home, Henry’s Chinese upbringing contrasts heavily with his father’s insistence to “Speak your American”.
    - i. He cannot understand why his father wants him to wear his button and yet be American.
    - ii. His relationship with his father degrades as a result.
  - d. Chinese nationalism affects Henry when he sees the conflict that his father is waging inside of his head by reading the news and listening to the radio.

- e. Henry makes the decision to not listen to his father's views.
  - i. When his father finds Keiko's photos and tosses them outside, Henry tells him, "She's not the enemy" (Ford 184).
  - ii. Henry walks through the door, and when his father objects, he explains that he is, "what you made me" (Ford 185).
- f. Later in the book, when Henry's father is dying, he confesses to using his position to ensure that Henry's letters were never delivered.
- g. Henry realizes that his father had tried to stop him from receiving Keiko's letters.
- h. Although he understands this, he knows that he loves his father who wanted the best for him.
- i. Henry no longer resents his father, because he will not allow himself to be defined by hatred for his father.
- j. Henry's vision of the "frail shell that was left of his once domineering father" (Ford 262) forces him to reconcile with his father and understand his perspective.
- k. Many years later, Henry tells his son Marty, "I'm not like Yay Yay – not like your grandfather" (Ford 81).

By the end of the novel, Henry gains maturity in life. Henry loves jazz because it is different, and this enables him to develop empathy and see the world from a different perspective. His friendship with Sheldon is uniquely defined not by business ideals or profit, but by music and camaraderie. Henry's friendship with Keiko later leads to him seeing the devotion the internees had to their country. He is no longer hateful of his father, rather, he has reconciled himself with his father. Instead of trying to avoid his problems like he formerly avoided his father, he fixes all of his problems. He comes to believe that the best thing to do is to "live in the present" (Ford 64). All of Henry's memories are lost in time, only to be discovered in the basement of the Panama Hotel. Henry reflects on his upbringing, and he learns to find the sweet among the bitter.