

*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* by Jamie Ford is a novel that explores the cultural conflicts that took place during the Second World War. As the main character Henry Lee develops as a character, we see the profound effects that his circumstances have on his perception of culture and heritage. Through his experiences, Henry learns what being an American truly entails. The American culture that raises Henry Lee ultimately enables him to transcend his father's old world prejudices and become an American. The major events that change Henry's development as a character include his acquaintance with swing jazz, his struggle with cultural identity, and his exposure to the effects of World War II era nationalism.

When Henry Lee hears of the legendary Oscar Holden, he talks with the sax player Sheldon about his big spotlight gig with the man. Henry mentions that his parents would be unhappy with his having a Japanese friend, and Sheldon replies, "I am Chinese. I am Lebanese. I am Pekinese. I am the ever-loving bees' knees" (Ford 28). This piece of wisdom would later be realized by Henry through the barbed wire of an internment camp. When Keiko later asks Henry about his liking jazz, he tells her, "Maybe because it's so different, but people everywhere still like it, they just accept musicians, no matter what color they are." (Ford 49). This gives insight into Henry's desire to be accepted. Henry wants to be accepted, and he finds that he is accepted best by Sheldon and his music. Henry is overwhelmed by the music, and describes it as a "speeding freight train" in comparison to the music that he hears along the South Jackson street. Since Henry is greatly impressed by the music and its unifying power, he has a common interest with the Japanese who are immediately arrested after the concert. As well as this, he understands why his father puts the button on his shirt when he is nearly arrested for being a spy.

From the beginning, one of the first things that Keiko tells Henry is, "I'm American" (Ford 20). Although Henry follows his father's nationalist leanings at first, he realizes later in the book

that Keiko truly is a loyal American. When Henry tries to buy Oscar Holden's record, the clerk initially refuses to serve him. Henry remarks, "You'd think grown-ups would act different" (Ford 115). 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. While Henry initially sees himself as Chinese, he becomes grateful for the opportunities that his special schooling has brought to him, such as meeting Keiko (Ford 154). As well as this, Henry expresses the concept of shame, when he confesses to Keiko of his parents, "They don't know" (Ford 165). Henry becomes an American. He thinks that going to China is terrifying, because it is a foreign country to him. He envisions being teased for not being Chinese (Ford 167).

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). 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. This experience shows that Henry understands that his classmates did not make the distinction. As a result of this, Henry gradually learns to commiserate with the Japanese, instead of listening to his father. Henry's father's Chinese nationalism influences Henry because he sees the conflict that his father is fighting inside of his head, as well as the contradictory nature of the button that his father puts on his shirt and his father's insistence to "Speak your American." Many years later, Henry tells his son Marty, "I'm not like Yay Yay – not like your grandfather" (Ford 81). Henry recognizes this in himself, but he also knows that he loves his father who wanted the best for him. This demonstrates that Henry understands that although his father tried to stop him from receiving Keiko's letters, he did it for the best.

By the end of the novel, Henry gains maturity and realizes that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. He is able to recognize his father in himself and yet not doubt his decisions and actions. He knows that his father is simply a product of his environment. Instead of trying to

avoid his problems like he did his father, he fixes all of his problems, including the broken record.