

# Growing Up By Gary Soto

Soto, Gary. (2008), *Growing Up*.  
In G. Soto, *Baseball in April and other stories* (pp. 97-107).  
New York: Harcourt.  
Permission pending

Now that Maria was a tenth-grader, she felt she was too grown-up to have to go on family vacation. Last year, the family had driven three hundred miles to see their uncle in West Covina. There was nothing to do. The days were hot, with a yellow sky thick with smog they could feel on their fingertips. They played cards and watched game shows on television. After the first four days of doing nothing while the grown-ups sat around talking, the kids finally got to go to Disneyland.

Disneyland stood tall with castles and bright flags. The Matterhorn had wild dips and curves that took your breath away if you closed your eyes and screamed. The Pirates of the Caribbean didn't scare anyone but was fun anyway, and so were the teacups, and It's a Small World. The parents spoiled the kids, giving each of them five dollars to spend on trinkets. Maria's younger sister, Irma, bought a Pinocchio coloring book and a candy bracelet. Her brothers, Rudy and John, spent their money on candy that made their teeth blue.

Maria saved her money. She knew everything was overpriced, like the Mickey Mouse balloons you could get for a fraction of the price in Fresno. Of course, the balloon at Hanoi's supermarket didn't have a Mickey Mouse Face, but it would bounce and float and eventually pop like any other balloon.

Maria folded her five dollars, tucked it in her red purse, and went on rides until she got sick. After that, she sat on a bench, jealously watching other teenage girls who seemed much better dressed than she was. She felt stricken by poverty. All the screaming kids in nice clothes probably came from homes with swimming pools in their backyards, she thought. Yes, her father was a foreman at a paper mill, and yes, she had a Dough-boy swimming pool in her backyard, but still, things were not the same. She had felt poor, and her sundress, which seemed snappy in Fresno, was out of style at Disneyland, where every other kid was wearing Esprit shirts and Guess jeans.

**Growing Up** by Gary Soto is a poignant and reflective piece that encapsulates the myriad experiences of youth, particularly focusing on the transition from childhood to adolescence. Soto, an acclaimed author and poet, captures the essence of growing up—its challenges, joys, and the bittersweet nature of leaving childhood behind. This article delves into the themes, characters, and writing style of "Growing Up," providing a comprehensive understanding of this evocative work.

## Overview of "Growing Up"

"Growing Up" is a semi-autobiographical narrative that reflects Gary Soto's own life experiences. Set against the backdrop of a Mexican-American community in California, the story is a blend of nostalgia, humor, and heart-wrenching moments. It takes readers through the formative years of the

protagonist, who navigates the complexities of family dynamics, cultural identity, and the inevitable journey toward adulthood.

## Key Themes

Several themes emerge prominently throughout "Growing Up," each contributing to the richness of the narrative:

### 1. Identity and Cultural Heritage

- Soto captures the struggle of young individuals trying to reconcile their cultural identity with the American experience. The protagonist's Mexican heritage plays a significant role in shaping his worldview and self-perception.
- The narrative explores the impact of cultural expectations on personal development, illustrating how traditions can both empower and constrain.

### 2. Family Dynamics

- Family is a central pillar in the narrative. The interactions with family members, particularly the protagonist's parents, reveal the complexities of love, disappointment, and support.
- Soto highlights the importance of familial bonds, while also addressing the conflicts that arise during the teenage years, such as misunderstandings and generational gaps.

### 3. The Journey to Adulthood

- The transition from childhood innocence to the more complicated realities of adolescence is a focal point of the story. Soto portrays the protagonist's experiences with first love, peer pressure, and the quest for independence.
- The bittersweet nature of growing up is illustrated through moments of joy juxtaposed with loss, emphasizing the inevitability of change.

### 4. Socioeconomic Struggles

- Soto does not shy away from addressing the socioeconomic challenges faced by his characters. The narrative reflects the realities of working-class life, highlighting the dreams and aspirations that often clash with financial limitations.
- Through the protagonist's lens, readers gain insight into the societal pressures that come with poverty and the resilience required to overcome them.

## Character Analysis

The characters in "Growing Up" are vividly portrayed, each contributing to the protagonist's journey in unique ways.

## The Protagonist

The unnamed protagonist serves as a relatable figure for many young readers. His experiences mirror those of countless adolescents grappling with their sense of self. Key characteristics include:

- **Curiosity:** The protagonist is naturally curious, eager to explore the world around him, which reflects the universal desire for discovery during youth.

- **Vulnerability:** His insecurities and fears are palpable, making him a sympathetic character. Readers witness his struggles with fitting in, experiencing first love, and dealing with the expectations of those around him.
- **Resilience:** Despite the challenges he faces, the protagonist demonstrates a remarkable ability to adapt and persevere, embodying the spirit of determination inherent in many young people.

## **Supporting Characters**

The supporting cast enriches the narrative and provides depth to the protagonist's experiences:

- **Parents:** The protagonist's mother and father represent the duality of love and discipline. Their interactions with their child offer insights into the generational differences in parenting styles and cultural expectations.
- **Friends:** The protagonist's friendships serve as a microcosm of adolescent social dynamics, showcasing the complexities of loyalty, betrayal, and camaraderie.
- **Romantic Interests:** The exploration of first love adds a layer of complexity to the protagonist's journey, illustrating the thrill and heartache that often accompany young relationships.

## **Writing Style**

Gary Soto's writing style in "Growing Up" is characterized by its simplicity and emotional resonance. Several elements define his approach:

## **Imagery and Descriptive Language**

Soto employs vivid imagery that transports readers into the protagonist's world. He paints a picture of the sights, sounds, and smells of his childhood environment, creating an immersive experience. For example:

- **Descriptive Scenes:** The bustling streets of a Mexican-American neighborhood come alive through Soto's words, allowing readers to feel the vibrancy and challenges of the setting.
- **Emotional Depth:** Soto's use of sensory details evokes the emotional landscape of growing up, making readers feel the weight of nostalgia, joy, and pain.

## **Humor and Wit**

Amidst the serious themes, Soto's humor shines through. His witty observations about the absurdities of adolescence provide comic relief, making the narrative relatable and engaging. This balance of humor and seriousness enhances the overall impact of the story.

## **Symbolism**

Throughout "Growing Up," Soto uses symbolism to deepen the narrative. Some notable symbols include:

- The Neighborhood: The protagonist's neighborhood represents both confinement and comfort, serving as a backdrop for his growth and the challenges he faces.
- Seasons: The changing seasons symbolize the passage of time and the transitions in the protagonist's life, reflecting the cyclical nature of growth and change.

## **Impact and Reception**

"Growing Up" has resonated with readers, particularly those from similar cultural backgrounds. Soto's ability to articulate the struggles and joys of adolescence has garnered widespread acclaim. Some key points regarding its impact include:

- Cultural Representation: The book provides a voice for the Mexican-American experience, shedding light on issues of identity and belonging that are often overlooked in mainstream literature.
- Educational Use: "Growing Up" is frequently included in school curriculums, serving as a valuable resource for discussions about culture, identity, and the adolescent experience.
- Personal Reflection: Readers often find themselves reflected in the narrative, prompting introspection about their own journeys through childhood and adolescence.

## **Conclusion**

In "Growing Up," Gary Soto masterfully captures the essence of childhood and the tumultuous journey to adulthood. Through rich themes, relatable characters, and evocative writing, he invites readers to reflect on their own experiences of growing up. The narrative serves not only as a coming-of-age story but also as a celebration of cultural identity and the resilience of youth. Soto's work remains a poignant reminder of the complexities of growing up, making it a timeless piece that resonates with readers of all ages.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

**What are the main themes explored in 'Growing Up' by Gary Soto?**

The main themes include the struggles of adolescence, the complexities of family dynamics, cultural identity, and the journey towards self-discovery.

**How does Gary Soto portray the experience of growing**

## **up in a Latino community?**

Soto portrays the experience with authenticity, highlighting both the challenges and the richness of cultural traditions, while emphasizing the importance of community and family support.

## **What role does family play in the narrative of 'Growing Up'?**

Family plays a crucial role as it serves as both a source of support and conflict, reflecting the complexities of relationships as the protagonist navigates adolescence.

## **What literary techniques does Gary Soto use to convey the emotions of growing up?**

Soto employs vivid imagery, relatable dialogue, and a reflective narrative voice to convey the emotions and experiences associated with growing up.

## **How does 'Growing Up' address the concept of cultural identity?**

The book addresses cultural identity by exploring the protagonist's experiences with cultural expectations, language barriers, and the desire to fit in while staying true to one's roots.

## **What impact does the setting have on the characters in 'Growing Up'?**

The setting, primarily in a working-class neighborhood, influences the characters' experiences and shapes their perspectives on life, aspirations, and community.

## **In what ways does humor play a role in 'Growing Up'?**

Humor is used as a coping mechanism for the characters, providing relief from the struggles they face and highlighting the lighter moments of adolescence.

## **What lessons can readers learn from 'Growing Up' by Gary Soto?**

Readers can learn about resilience, the importance of understanding one's identity, and the value of family and community support during the tumultuous years of growing up.

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