Conclusion

Traversing Boundaries: A Shared Experience

He holds him with his glittering eye —
The wedding-guest stood still,
And listening like a three years’ child:
The Mariner hath his will.¹

Ultimately, the appeal of every literary artist must be that of Coleridge’s Mariner. This study has tried to describe the effect of the glittering eye as it has revealed itself in the particularities of individual works; and in this final chapter the perspective is on the kind of will that these writers have explored. This study has tried to understand the imaginative texture of these novels of adolescence even when the aim of art is quite different from the “clear logic of a triumphant conclusion.”²

The real achievement of a work of art is indeed that it fuses and resolves all the forces around it, personal and general, into a unified experience. John. W. Aldridge says, “The novelist begins always with the meaning, which he, as a unique sensibility brings to the experience he has chosen as his material.”³

Each novel represents the individual vision of an artist, his direct impression of reality. Consequently, the unique sensibility of these writers enhances the scope of this study. This is a quality that altogether transcends the gender and socio-cultural polarities destructive to self-realization. The many similarities among the presentations yield common,
human concerns while the differences reveal the subtler pressures exerted on special groups and regions within American society. As can be seen from this study the novels take on new dimensions through their adolescent characters that are central to all the novels, and this study explores what is more or less an adolescent milieu. The writers chronicle the steps that the adolescents take in order to gain control over their lives and destinies. In so doing, these writers have made of the adolescent novel a pathway to the authentic self. The social context as well is challenged by new questions, and “the way life happens by itself” rather than the way it is defined for us by “all those lies”: “They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong” (HMS, p.100) In short, the adolescents’ radical individuality seems to call the entire social fabric into question challenging its very premise about issues of equality, of class, and gender. As these adolescents mature, their assertion of self often evolves into an assertion of their values as well as a challenging of the "lies" they have been told. Potentially, therefore, this self-discovery of adolescents’ male and female promises the rediscovery of social balance opposing the destructive dualism of the prevalent system. This study approaches the human condition in its social context through the fictional American adolescents. Women find themselves in a world of questionable values in which ironically they have to play the role of
"caretaker" of these values. While the Bildungsroman suggests an organic unfolding and a harmonious integration of all aspects of the self, when used in the context of the American genre, it is redefined by turning attention away from organic integration in order to express the acute conflicts and complexity that characterizes life. These novels illustrate both the new opportunities for female independence and paradoxically the modern-day prejudices still stifling women's growth. They reject the expectation of others, and through self-discovery attempt to claim their real selves. Alienated by mass society, each with an array of failed relationships, these protagonists discover within themselves something like Augie March's "axial lines of truth, love peace, bounty, usefulness, harmony urging them outward again to human contact" (AM, p.524). "The pages reveal the tactics [adolescents] adopted the weapons they chose, the victories they sought — and finally won." In addition, the theme of movement or journey provides the progressive drive in these stories revealing that the issues the novels raise are universal enough, timeless enough, to transcend the boundaries of age, place, or condition.

The novelists included here do not give us their works as an object to be held up statically to view, or as a text that by its very nature will elicit contradictory responses that demolish any possibility of a basic reading. For: "Nothing, no power, will keep a book steady and
motionless before us, so that we may have time to examine its shape and
design." They offer us, instead, the opportunity to undergo an
imaginative experience, to recreate a set of happenings that have been
selected and arranged according to some particular significance they
imply. The happenings may be extensive, but they recognize them as
forming the basic experience of the novel, and expect the readers to do so
too. We therefore sense in these narratives, an intense and sustained
thoughtfulness, as these novels are presented both structurally and
thematically neither to resolve a problem nor to conclude an action but
only to evoke the keenest moments of realization possible, which the
writers have presented with "faithfulness to the most candid perceptions,
and to the implications of language." The effect is almost like music or
poetry: "to give us the essence of experience transfused and heightened,
and expressed in such fashion that we may contemplate it at the same
instant that we are swayed by it." 

These works focus on a number of metaphoric foci, which emerge
without the authors necessarily trying to tie them down to a fixed and
single defining label. But a "stubborn idiosyncrasy" is paradoxically, one
of the elements they have most strongly in common; it is, what their
central characters and what they, as authors, most determinedly aim at:
"A kind of genuine stubbornness, a personal idealism, and an idealism
that lies beyond axiological or moral categories"\(^\text{10}\) is seen. It is an idealism that celebrates autonomy as a fundamental individual right. It is an idealism of the self that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has identified as “the autotelic self — a self that has self-contained goals.”\(^\text{11}\) It is a self that fiercely asserts and guards the validity and integrity of its own experience, validity and integrity that requires no other validation except that the self be wholly content. This is a kind of radical disposition, which shows an openness to experience, a deliberate vulnerability to life.

Apart from the obvious differences in social and chronological situations in the chosen novels, there is a common concentration on the delicate and sensitive character of the young adolescents, on whose psyche all external elements — incidents as well as people — leave an indelible mark. Stated broadly, the preoccupation of American novels of adolescence has been from the outside world to an inner self. Jung has suggested that one learns about life by first turning inward: “proceed from the dream outward.” It is a search for a fully realized self and place within the community; it is a search for “the dream (that) is the truth” (Radiant Daughters, p.48).

The traditional Bildungsroman focuses on an outward, linear movement that allows the male protagonist to achieve self-realization through becoming a contributing member of society. The writers
discussed here emphasize the psychological impact of adolescents, focusing their attention on their reactions to the external ambience with an insight into their minds. In the texts examined here, writers offer several examples of protagonists whose development unfolds through separation from oppressive social and familial structures. In this sense, one can compare the four examples of novels of adolescence, as incorporating plot elements similar to those of the Bildungsroman, and as mirroring — through their adolescent protagonists — the development and transformation of society, the dissolution of values, the increasing materialism and egocentrism diffused in human behavior. Notwithstanding dramatic moments of crisis and disappointment these adolescents gradually react in a positive manner, and fight their own battle for survival, thus becoming responsible adults. In all these cases, the adolescents grow up through dramatic trials and traumatic disappointments. Without much help or affection, either from family or society they have had to struggle towards maturity. The journey of the young inexperienced protagonists along the initiation path sometimes evokes sympathy, and at other times disapproval of their choices, while observing their reactions to the trials imposed by life. As it happens in every traditional Bildungsroman, every event becomes automatically attracted into the orbit of personality, and every episode becomes
meaningful only when the protagonist is shown to attain a psychological maturity. As Franco Moretti remarks:

Trial, in the Bildungsroman, is instead an opportunity: not an obstacle to be overcome while remaining 'intact', but something that must be incorporated, for only by stringing together 'experiences' does one build a personality.12

In this sense, every event, every betrayal, every disappointment becomes a means for the young adolescent to accumulate experiences, to change personality, and to increase self-knowledge as well as knowledge of society and facts. Viewed in this light, the ending chosen by each author defines the growth reached by the adolescent and mirrors in some way the author’s own view of the contemporary world. Thus, in the end, each adolescent is less naïve and more discerning.

The planned framework of this study is the concept of a journey, but also how this journey becomes a metaphor for carving a legitimate space for adolescents in their community, struggling for a new pattern of order. These novels present us with a multi-layered plot involving the patterns of quest. This quest to define their true selves is what is attempted in each of the chapters in this book. Each story emerges from the quest for a pattern, a quest, which determines the novel’s spiritual outline, and the experience of a pattern-less world. It is argued here that the protagonists try to rediscover a creative possibility within the invisible layers of their selves. A major feature of these novels is, therefore, their
inward concentration on the world they map out. The concept of self in these novels opens with the collision between the adolescents evolving self, and society's fixed idea of that self. This eventually leads the adolescent to self assertion resulting in the possibility of a new authentic way of living. The adolescents present themselves as the ones who wholeheartedly embrace that most cherished of American doctrines: individualism. They divide their consciousness into their dream world, on the one hand, a place where feelings are liberated, and a vision of conventional society on the other hand, a stoical acceptance of facts. The vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescents' attitude toward the future conflict with the expectations and dictates of society. But in the end they are facilitated to a great extent by this very expectations and dictates of society to validate their awakened selves.

The psychosocial concerns which affect the lives of adolescents as they progress from childhood to adulthood are: the development of identity, the growth of autonomy, the search for intimacy and the establishment of peer relationships based on trust, openness, and a similarity of values; the management of one's developing sexuality; and the need to achieve, and be recognized for one's achievements. Similarities and a recurrent pattern appearing in each of the works have been arranged thematically, as follows: self-realization — including
identity questions, self-discovery, and self-knowledge; sex roles — including male/female roles and role models; inner and outer directedness — including psychological, sexual, ideological, and societal. The foregoing themes are related to the adolescents' personal quest which manifests itself as a spiritual quest. By means of the ideographic structure and its contradictory perspectives, as well as the point of view and symbolic episodes such as the awakening scene, the reader encounters imaginative truths, which are themselves complex, mysterious, even incomplete.

The dominant theme is alienation the causes of which are frequently obscure, but always complex. Sometimes society seems at fault with its record of racial prejudice, and patriarchal domination. But sometimes the fault seems to lie deeply in the turbulence of the spirit of the protagonists resulting in the failure of personal relationships. The study further examines the connecting themes that run throughout the stories, and chronicles the protagonists' development toward self-realization. It analyses their physical and sexual journeys from possessed objects to self-directed, insubordinate humans, and also explores the mental and spiritual changes that accompany these efforts. The protagonists go through a series of experiences and discoveries, and through changes of perspective enlarge their horizons of understanding.
and find their true selves. It also explores the characters' attempt to understand sexuality, freedom, and personal space without being labeled or defined by others. It finally illustrates the importance of writing as an instrument for liberation. After tracing the protagonists' movements through various developmental stages on the road to maturity and self-realization, it becomes apparent, particularly in the postmodern period, that the representation of a coherent self which these writers seek to portray always remains a process.

Each chapter begins with a discussion of plot, followed by an analysis of the novel's characters. The search for who they are is universal, but unique to each individual. This quest for self-knowledge is at the heart of every journey. The writers' skill at character development allows the reader to watch as characters slowly gain a sense of self, and a set of values on which they can base a future that makes sense to them. As they interact with the people in their lives, they learn from those encounters. The first aspect of the journey inward takes the form of an acute consciousness of the world of the ego, and of a consequent turning away from societal norms that the authors graphically and specifically detail. But they move toward self-awareness, and develop a substantive core of beliefs that eventually allow them to make a different kind of place for themselves within their family, and in the world. Additionally,
the characters’ slow transformation into an independent young adult becomes more believable because the writers are able to project the characters’ future self in their early actions. For instance, although Holden/Augie/Esperanza/Frances are definitely driven by natural forces, concerned about their looks, influenced by their friends, and feel defiant towards parents, even early in the stories they are shown to be adolescents with many positive characteristics. These glimpses of their personalities and strengths are inherent in the plot tensions, and further illustrate just how little the parents know about their children. The protagonists’ willingness to take a stand, to grow, and to base their future on the values which they themselves try to develop, forms the core of the novels. This is why the relevant role of the tutor has also been stressed in these novels. An adult figure — other than a mother or father — helps and defends the adolescent in the vicissitudes of growing up, offering advice and friendship. Berenice proves to be such a tutor for the young heroine Frankie, Antolini for Holden, Einhorn for Augie, the women of her neighborhood for Esperanza. They are either attached to these chaperons and tutors, or abandoned to their own musings and mistakes since it is up to them to make their own choices in life.

An important aspect of the novels in the study is the construction of a center of consciousness, the structuring of a linguistic ‘I’. The French
psychologist, Jacques Lacan believes that “it is when a child recognizes himself in a mirror that the ‘I’ is precipitated.” To find out what the ‘I’ really is, is the central preoccupation in these novels. Initially the ‘I’ is a vertical wall excluding all that do not contribute to the self. But the novels demonstrate the necessity of breaching this wall, and selflessly extending oneself to others. The main movement of the action is the shift of the ‘I’ from artificial ego to a more authentic self. The novels seek to link the protagonists’ external reflections to the internal ‘I’, which must comprehend the nature of what it sees. Salinger's classic of adolescent rebellion, tells of how sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield rebels against all that he perceives as phony in upper-middle-class 1940s society. The first-person narrative, recounted from an unspecified psychiatric facility where Holden is convalescing after a nervous breakdown, describes his flight from Pencey preparatory school and his subsequent experiences in New York City shortly before Christmas. Salinger's small body of fiction is unified by a preoccupation with several core themes: the exploitation of childhood innocence and integrity by insensitive, superficial adults; the longing for kinship and unconditional love amid the alienation and absurdity of modern life; and the quest for spiritual enlightenment in a materialistic world. Holden's conflict of conscience, centers largely upon his desire to protect the young and vulnerable from the perils of what he
understands as adult corruption, particularly in the form of inauthenticity. Holden's struggle to reconcile this with his inevitable maturation is intimately linked to his despair over the hostility and apathy of modern society. His naïve concern for the winter well-being of the ducks in Central Park and his exasperation at the presence of obscene graffiti signify his preoccupation with the preservation of innocence and integrity at both a personal and social level. *The Catcher in the Rye* is the story of a quest, a search for truth in a world that has been dominated by falsity. It is the search for personal integrity by a hero who constantly falls short of his own ideal, who, in fact, participates in the very falsity he is trying to escape. The hero's internal and external conflict forms the dramatic core of the novel. The drama is further intensified as his vision of inner and outer falsity becomes more and more overwhelming. The significance of the catcher image lies in three things. First of all, it is a savior image, and shows us the extent of Holden's spiritual idealism. Second, it crystallizes for us Holden's concept of good and evil; childhood is good, the only pure good, but it is surrounded by perils, the cliff of adolescence over which the children will plunge into the evil of adulthood unless stopped. But finally, the image is based on a misunderstanding. The title of the novel refers to a Robert Burns lyric that Holden significantly misquotes and adopts as his personal motto.
Both Holden's nihilistic view of life as it is and his notion of what life ought to be is based on a misunderstanding of man's place in the universe. In this central metaphor is condensed the essence of the novel, though not until the end does Holden fully understand the significance of the difference between "man catching" and "man meeting." Holden realizes, vision or consciousness is pure only when it is disinterested, when it is motivated by the desire for knowing rather than getting. Man has the "gift of incisive vision, never of the whole of reality, but of surfaces and fragments." Holden's behavior with Phoebe proves to us the genuineness of the catcher image. When tested, his love for Phoebe and his desire to save her innocence is far greater than his hatred for the world and his determination to abandon it. His love of good is stronger than his hatred of evil. And so, paradoxically, he is saved through saving. The important thing he realizes is that these are the conditions of life and rather than to attempt the impossible man should meet man, form a relationship of love and understanding with him, and in so doing help him toward his goal just as Holden is doing here with Phoebe. In the final chapter where he misses everybody, even Maurice shows the effect on Holden of his altered catcher ideal. The concern to communicate, to establish a relationship with man, has led to the love of man. The novel's resolution transcends sociological indictment in affirming individual
responsibility. What he attains is a new vision, and is liberated from his idealistic notions. Looking back from such an enlightened position, he can see that what he took for reality at a given time and in a particular situation was only illusion. Holden does his growing up amid turbulent forces and conflicting loyalties. His indictment of the public school system, with its rampant prejudice, and destruction of human dignity, is as stinging as other adolescents but Holden in telling his story seems to come back to normal, so that the very telling has the effect of giving him strength. It is not clear how Holden will relate to his phony world again, except that he consciously chooses it, perhaps because he needs people, no matter what they are like. So the action of the novel is precisely to bring the two windows of his eyes together and focus that wonder and terror fused with all the languages of explanation, but going beyond them all. The whole book is a preparation for that single moment of visual perception that must be wholly ‘objective’ before it is anything else, but finally holds so much in such fusion of opposites that it is beyond words, and can only be caught, in a flash, by the “Blakean eye of innocence.”

“The challenge of composing order constitutes the very essence of human condition,” and is the basic problem of modern man. On the social level it is seen in the form of violence resulting from the clash between different types of order. It is also experienced in the form of evil
resulting from not only over-assertion of the ego, but irrational faith as well. There is the “natural chaos of existence,” again there is the fallen man’s sense of separateness, or alienation from the universe. In the process of seeking order, man imposes his will on others like Augie’s “reality instructors” or exploits the universe egotistically like Holden’s “phonies.” The basic problem of modern man is “learning to live fearlessly in the natural chaos of existence without forcing artificial patterns on it.” Both Salinger and Bellow (in different ways) introduce their comically ill-equipped young heroes not merely to assorted individuals and situations, but rather to individuals and situations that are clearly representative of the great sources of power and control in our times. Bellow working on a larger canvas keeps his protagonist running through extraordinarily jumbled situations that reveal the contemporary force of race, of education, of technology, of sex, and of politics. Augie writes out his memoirs presenting a chronological account of his adventures from childhood to manhood. This recall of his past is not a form of nostalgic indulgence. The act of writing is for Augie, as it was for Holden an enactment of the process of self-discovery.

In theme and in style, The Adventures of Augie March bears out the validity of Bellow’s observation: “We are not born to be condemned but to live.” To Bellow it is wrong to believe that contemporary man is
condemned to live a dreadful life; the only thing he is condemned to be “in this world is human.” In his opinion, art is “the community’s medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness” (1960, p.414). Each of Bellow’s heroes represents the same desperate struggle for life, for a more refined consciousness. According to Bellow, Art offers a “compensation of the hopelessness or meanness of existence” (1960, p.414). Breaking from the modern novel’s concern with form and structure, Bellow’s has the shapeless, episodic structure of the picaresque novel. Out of the apparent chaos, however, emerges an order imposed by sheer exuberance for living, a vibrant affirmation of the joy contained in infinite variety, and ceaseless experimentation. Consequently the novel exhibits a steady and evolving preoccupation with the emergence of Augie who, through his fierce determination to live, rises above the overwhelming conditions of life and achieves a heroic stature. But although Augie is above all else determined to remain a free man, he is by no means indifferent to the claims of the world around him. What he does, however, is to sift ideas and experiences through his consciousness, impatiently rejecting whatever he believes to be temporary or irrelevant: “And all great experience would only take place within the walls of his being” (AM, p.455). He arrives at two conclusions not in logical fashion but in his own intuitive way. One idea is out of Thoreau, that “the reason
for solitude can only be reunion,” the other, that it is tiresome “to have your own opinions on everything” (AM, p.447). Despite his apparent passivity, Augie holds fast to certain deep beliefs. He is on the side of life and people; he will never give up. Bellow’s great contribution lies in his ability to socialize the effort to survive in the modern world. In effect, Bellow’s novel moves in a pattern of incompleteness, but toward the ultimate completion, which is to have “sufficient power to overcome ignominy and to complete [one’s] own life.” One needs to remember that Bellow speaks, not of the grand affirmation or of the "beatitude" of some contemporaries, but of sufficient power, the strategies of survival that govern the "affirmation of life," and keep it from getting out of hand. Augie discovers the comic possibilities in man’s tragic condition, and at the end, “got to grinning again” (AM, p.536). Experience always felt to the utmost — this becomes the measure of affirmation in Bellow’s version of modern society. In both books, there is a kind of logical order to the events encountered, and so there is a pattern of sorts within the experiences undergone. It is not a fixed and final design, and it is, in any case, a design darkly tinged with irony. It serves to explain the frailties of the heroes by making manifest the irrelevance of moral commitment — irrelevance, at least, to the contemporary sources of power and control. But that manifestation only makes the moral commitment of these comic
heroes, and implicitly of their authors, all the more compelling. And in their handling of these paradoxical situations, these writers reveal how, even in a world in which the moral order has succumbed to the disruptive and the possessive, fiction can still achieve that narrative order — that internal artistic order which is form, and on which the life of fiction must always depend. Conversely, through the form and order they have created by their narrative art, we ourselves are able better to measure the disorders of the actual world we must, somehow, continue to live in.

Adolescents who are experiencing identity exploration, but still have not made any commitments, are in “the prime danger of this age” a status called a “psychosocial moratorium.” Such a moratorium, according to Erickson is a good thing, provided it does not go on for too long. To successfully resolve the normative crisis of adolescence, one needs both the exploration, and the commitment. “The identity status associated with both exploration and commitment is identity achievement.” These writings, by re-enacting this myth reminds us of Erick Erickson’s theory of the adolescent identity crisis — the sense that the full potentialities of the self have never been found in the level of being, and so life seems to lack meaning. Somewhere in the experiences of childhood is the reason for the damned-up sense of the inauthentic. Something is wrong with the contemporary soul, and these writers give us
a clue — it has to do with being, and the failure of love. Through the Bildungsroman structure and the adolescents' own consciousness these novels create an adolescence in the process of ‘Becoming’ rather than as a character who is in a state of ‘Being.’ Glikin reports that "stagnation would be the result of an exclusive upholding either as a mode of existence for the individual."\textsuperscript{23} The amalgamation of both Being and Becoming are vital to each of the protagonists. Implicit in the narrative structure, is the ever-flowing consciousness of the main characters, affirming "this dynamic aspect of human experience."\textsuperscript{24} In following how the young adolescents move from their ego-centered world to the outside world, we can trace the interdependence of inner and outer directedness. Asking crucial questions concerning their inner directed life, and in looking for answers, allowing for a consciousness of choice, is one of the hallmarks of Bildung for the adolescents. To accomplish this promise, they reach out to others — and to the outer directed world. After "painful soul searching,"\textsuperscript{25} Holden makes a sort of accommodation to a world he can adapt to, at which time he has left adolescence and entered maturity. Holden’s journey is more than a movement through space — it is a movement of affirmation. Similarly Marcus Klein has traced a pattern in Bellow’s fiction in which "the sensible hero journeyed from a position of alienation to accommodation."\textsuperscript{26} Holden’s progress from identity
confusion, to a "psychosocial moratorium," and finally to commitments that qualify as "identity achievement" carries him along the same line of development followed by all the adolescent protagonists. Along the way, the rest of the community grows as well. Among the other important messages of the study is the notion that development occurs within a social system. The changes experienced by one family member influence other family members, for good or ill. The changes are by and large positive ones for all members of the community.

This study also exemplifies how fiction embraces a poetics that transcends traditional boundaries of genre and gender. The fact of selecting two female writers and the particular attention given to the feelings and reactions of adolescent girls create many exceptions to the male prototype and give us a chance to consider the relevance of such a theme in a study of this nature. Although the traditional term Bildung has been adopted to indicate the developmental process, its implications are quite unorthodox when it comes to women characters. Deceived, disappointed, deeply introspective, and deprived, these female adolescents wander through the maze of contemporary experience, shouldering the burdens of being stranded in a hostile, often meaningless world; they embark on "an endless and cyclical journey" — a long series of circular reflections on the past, connected to the present by the
character's circular and always repetitive reflections — “impelled by nostos without realized destinations: for them, there is no promised land, no home.”27 Since women are alienated from time and space, their plots take on cyclical, rather than linear form, and their houses’ and landscapes’ surreal images and symbols appear as fragments in women's fiction. One discovers in women's novels a clear sense that they have “neither a homeland of their own nor an ethnic place within society.” Their quests for being are thwarted on every side by what they are told to be and to do, which is different from men: “when they seek an identity based on human personhood rather than on gender, they stumble about in a landscape whose signposts indicate retreats from, rather than ways to, adulthood.”28

In existential terms, their desire for responsible selfhood, for the achievement of authenticity through individual choice, comes up against the assumption that a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender. If authenticity depends upon totality of self — the greatest possible exercise of our capacities for significant work, intellectual growth, political action, creativity, emotional development, sexual expression, etc — then women are supposed to be less than total selves. Men can choose Sartre's quality of 'mauvaise foi', the ‘bad faith’ of avoiding human responsibility: “for
women it is not a matter of choice but a precondition for social acceptance” (Pratt, 1981, p.6).

Sandra Cisneros and Carson McCullers give significance to human action justifying the female protagonists’ observations and validating the steps they take. As an Argentinean feminist says: “The domestic is not an inferior compartment of existence but a tactile, sensuous relationship with things.” That relationship demonstrates value, the value of the woman in her community, a person who should not be so easily erased from cultural history. The reader gains the opportunity to celebrate the diversity of human experience and to participate in the reconfiguration of identity. Sandra Cisneros and McCullers capture the image of women who need to create their own path, not only within their culture and society, but also in fiction. They therefore replace the traditional ending of the female quest story by presenting a different developmental process, and alternative destinies for the protagonists. Through the liberating act of writing and aesthetic development, the protagonists of *The House on Mango Street* and *The Member of the Wedding* become conscious of their female identity, and through their writing and art affirm their bond to the community. Each narrative is grounded in the protagonist's conscious exploration of the contradictions between internal and external definitions of the self,
between socio-cultural values and gender role expectations and the female self. The narrating "I" articulates her own experiential perspectives on her own Bildung process, and becomes, through the act of articulation, an active agent of her own self-education. The central theme of each narrative is thus the narrator/protagonist's articulation of her own growing consciousness of her position as a woman within her particular socio-cultural context, an understanding that enables each protagonist to imagine herself beyond patriarchal confinement of the female self. Here the narratives, unlike in the traditional Bildungsroman, do not follow a linear process that leads the protagonist from adolescence to maturity, rather each narrative is composed of fragments of insights and experiences that in some way heighten the protagonist's consciousness about her own development as a woman within a particular socio-cultural context. According to one description of the Bildungsroman, the learning and growth process of the protagonist can be charted through its most characteristic feature — its "elusiveness, alternations of insights, its sense of confusion and inconsequentiality." The loss of self and its discovery becomes one of the distinguishing characteristics of the female Bildungsroman, while marked by "elusiveness" and "alternations of insights." The road from "nothingness to selfhood is traversed in the quest" and precedes awakening for the
woman questing — a "coming to oneself" — as a potential inherent in the individual and in the vision she has of her society as a Utopian one. Even while these writers attached themselves to a traditional genre, they elaborated upon the older structure, challenged its assumptions, and finally fashioned it into *Bildungsroman* representative of women's consciousness. This is seen in the close relationship which we find existing among the two heroines. Although separated in time and space they share a common bond in the thematic material examined here. By breaking into the traditional genre, the female heroine has brought new meaning to *Bildung* and the *Bildungsroman*.

A series of vignettes in *The House on Mango Street* show that the protagonist wished to escape both into a real house, and into "the house of fiction." To tell a story of the self is 'to create a fiction.' Esperanza's search for a *real* house is at the same time a quest for self-expression, for a liberating self-creation that dismantles traditional male-defined myths and texts that have locked the Chicano into confining stereotypes. Her own quest for a *real* house is thus a quest for a new Chicano text, one that names her own experiences and represents her as a Chicano in all her subjective complexity, one that does not make her "feel like nothing" (*HMS*, p.5). As the author’s alter-ego, Esperanza knows she requires a space for autonomy in order to create her fiction and her self apart from
the traditional role of women in her culture. This is what Esperanza, whose name means ‘hope’, dreams of. Two narrative threads connect the stories in the novel: the personal and private story of Esperanza Cordero, and the public and collective story of the neighborhood on Mango Street. Esperanza’s personal transformation is rooted in her observations about the people in her neighborhood, which provide her with a community education. From each member of her community, she learns what to become and what not to become. The house the protagonist longs for, certainly, is a house where she can have her own room and one that she can point to in pride, but, as noted through this discussion of the poetics of space, it is fundamentally a metaphor for “the house of storytelling.”

The desire for a physical home evolves into a spiritual and political home, one that will allow Esperanza freedom, but will allow her to remain loyal to her barrio, and one that will emerge through the written word. In effect, The House on Mango Street is the house of stories through which Esperanza/Cisneros gives voice to her neighborhood and accomplishes her journey. Esperanza records, as a writer, not only her own personal journey towards transformation, but also that of her neighborhood, a neighborhood that represents the collective story of Latino neighborhoods across the United States.
Esperanza makes a clear link between language and identity when she turns to the act of narrating her experiences on Mango Street. She uses her own experiential perspective as a strategy to escape social oppression and the threat this oppression presents to her own sense of self. Naming her own experiences is a way of defining and validating these experiences as well as her own perspectives. It is, at the same time, an affirmation of her being that is grounded in language, in a new naming of self and her socio-cultural reality. Esperanza has come to understand that the "real house" she has been searching for is an un-confining creative space. Telling her own story, the narrating "I" participates in the process of her own self-formation, while she at the same time creates a poetic space that stands as an alternative to the confining conditions on Mango Street. Yet in the course of telling her stories she comes to recognize the significance of Mango Street in her life, and that it forms an inextricable part of her own self. In the end when Esperanza envisions her own departure from Mango Street, it is with the intention of returning for those she leaves behind. Through her role as a writer, however, her Bildung is not merely individual, but takes on communal significance, as she, with the text, is reaching back to the women on Mango Street so that her own liberating self-creation may in turn become a symbolic Bildung experience for those "who cannot out." The communal significance of
Esperanza’s *Bildung* is further underscored by the fact that, while her primary concern is for the women who cannot escape marginalization, the text goes beyond an exclusive portrayal of the oppression of Chicanos to name and give voice to other outsiders in the community. Personal identity and public behavior are always linked. Society both forms and de-forms character, because it is both a hindrance to self-realization and the context in which self-realization must occur. That is, Esperanza wants to escape from Mango Street, because she feels that it stultifies her, but she always carries Mango Street with her in memory and in her own evolving personality. Esperanza’s character reveals her existence within her community by seeking to define her own path. As with the male heroes, it is the protagonist’s own introspection and discovery toward fulfillment that matters.

Esperanza, through her spirit and imagination, invents new possibilities for her life, possibilities that give her a freedom and power to reach beyond the limits of her neighborhood. Cisneros gives us a voice whose story introduces us to an American life richer in human relationships than in material wealth, a voice that engages with the challenges and joys of that disparity. Esperanza also builds a new space by imagining a house that moves “toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.”35 Neither private nor communitarian,
the house she imagines belongs to "the realm of the beyond" it is porous, an interior space, which is experienced as open; it is a creative site of introspection, and at the same time a space of intimacy and connection, a refuge for all those without a roof. Thus, Esperanza's imaginary dwelling crosses customary boundaries and becomes a bridge, "this bridge we call home."37

Like her narrator who does not wish to inherit the ready-made house of her barrio, Cisneros redefines "the rented cultural space of the Bildungsroman"38 She borrows from the general configurations of the traditional male Bildungsroman, and applies them to her novel. The fictional house she builds with her Chicano and feminist perspective, in other words the textual container of these vignettes, accommodates within its flexible walls a multiplicity of worlds simultaneously. Thus, this blurring of boundaries also offers new models of reading literary texts, which challenge totalizing interpretive paradigms. For Cisneros, identity is achieved, or happens, circularly. It requires engagement with society and culture. She advocates an ethic that involves both loyalty (coming back) and change (getting out): "I have gone away to come back" (HMS, p.110). The goal of Esperanza is to fashion an identity for herself, which allows her to control her own destiny, and at the same time maintain a strong connection to her community. As the central consciousness of the
text, the narrator/protagonist is the agent of his/her own story who takes on narrative authority in respect to what aspects of his/her life and his/her experiences are meaningful to his/her own Bildung process. Crucial to this process of discovery of self within a socio-cultural context is the narrator's conscious exploration of the contradictions between the internal perception of self and the external definitions, contradictions that the narrator/protagonist interprets through his/her own experiential perspective. In the section called "My Name," the protagonist says “it was my great-grandmother’s name and now it is mine…” and ends by saying she'd like to baptize herself “under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X Yes Something like Zeze the X will do” (HMS, p. 11). Her chosen name seems to indicate a variable to be expressed, indicative of an identity to be shaped. In the meantime she feels herself to be like an X, an indeterminate personality in search of an identity. It suggests her self-determination, her desire to be her own person, and also her love of language. By naming herself, she creates a new and autonomous inner self, exemplifying Elaine Showalter's remark, "The act of naming and self-naming has long been fundamental to cultural identity and self-assertion." Unlike Frankie who wants a total gender transformation in order to acquire power denied to her as a female, Esperanza’s desire to re-
baptize herself and assume a different name can be viewed as a step
towards self-assertion within her given environment. Esperanza rejects
the role models which her society offers her and consciously chooses to
forge her own identity through writing; and in so doing, she symbolically
chooses the American translation of her name (hope) over the Spanish
(waiting). This shows us that Esperanza has a voice she can use to speak
out, and although she is taking small steps now, she will likely come to
find her strong voice soon. By giving Esperanza this voice, Cisneros is
expressing optimism, optimism that the situation can change and that
Esperanza has the potential to become.

In *The Member of the Wedding* Carson McCullers shows that
adolescence is “a haze of loneliness and groping shot through with
private fantasy and furious outbreak against a complacent adult
society.” She embodies the same problems of adolescence, and its
confrontation of the evils of experience in her novel which resembles *The
Catcher in the Rye*, in that it focuses on the failure of the adolescent to
adjust to the confusions of the adult world. Frankie Addams, embodies in
exaggerated form all those traits of immaturity which other novels have
described more normally, and thereby rivets our attention on them the
more firmly. Frankie's feeling of desperate isolation and alienation drives
her to identify herself with her older brother and his fiancée, until she
tries to join them on their honeymoon. But “this grotesque situation merely emphasizes the confusion of all adolescents, and of all maladjusted members of human society.” She is unable to make her imaginary and her real worlds meet. Her friendly "inside room" is furnished with her dreams and aspirations while the "outside room" of the world leaves her puzzled and perplexed. The focus is again on the alienation of the individual, with race and gender identification continuing to be the primary examples of how our society isolates its members. Pitted against the overpowering forces of nature and society, individuals find that they have only each other to give value to life. With D. H. Lawrence, Carson McCullers believed that "we need one another and that we attain our very individuality itself in living contact, the give-and-take of human relations. Lawrence felt that without such relationships, we are nonentities." McCullers’ protagonists’ find such a moment of pure love, a sudden illumination, and, like Frankie, feel that someone or something is "the we of me" (HMS, p.42). Then, no matter how “evanescent the instant, the experience brings a sense of warmth and togetherness that makes the barest solitudes endurable, that gives the heart a brief respite from aloneness” (Kohler, 1951, p.58).

McCullers described herself as attempting in this novel to write "a lyric tragicomedy in which the funniness and grief coexist in the same
an effect she really strove for in all of her fiction and which was central to her artistic aspirations, but which was never more completely realized than in this novel of adolescence. As the *New York Times* proclaimed editorially upon her death, she was "the vibrant voice of love and loneliness in the Southern novel" (DLB vol.2, McCullers, p.324).

These writers are ultimately concerned with exploring what Hawthorne called the "labyrinth of the human heart," and what they have found therein has not always provided cause for rejoicing. The only way in which one can communicate with one's fellow "prisoners of consciousness" is through love: this affords one a certain measure of relief, but the relief is incomplete and temporary since love is seldom a completely mutual experience and is subject to time. What they conceive to be the truth about human nature is a melancholy truth: A flaw exists in the very nature of love, and frustration is the lot of man. Even though these protagonists entertain "unreal visions"—the world is perhaps too painfully mutable for each — "there is something admirable in their fidelity to an ideal world each contemplates." They are noble protagonists dreaming their dreams and pursuing their ideals in a cruel visionless world. We are simply presented with a vision that affirms the need for wholeness "as though the possibilities of greatness-of-wholeness — still existed." The adolescents grow older, more mature, and more
“human” with an increasing awareness, and appreciation of the qualities that enable the individual as well as mankind to ‘survive’: “how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure victims of something,” is the permanent issue in these novels. These novels of discovery present a new narrative model that includes the survival of the protagonists an awakening to characterize the adolescents’ consciousness of their potential independence. Despite the experiences of alienation, one can read these novels as attempts to counter despair by a renewed faith in the self. All these authors have created a fiction of hope. In the accounts given by these writers, the achievement of self-assurance, the realization of one's potentials, the choice of a certain future, and the projection of naive attitudes all contribute to the final maturing. They are ready to embark on life like responsible, reasonable adults even though difficulties, prejudices, and unforeseen obstacles come in their way. Different as these protagonists are in character and temperament, in the same way as the four authors chosen for study, they are all concerned with one principal activity, i.e., learning. They all learn to see life from a different point of view, and are all taught to look more perceptively with fewer ideological restraints into themselves. Most of all, they transform their difficult circumstances through art by using their inherent creativity. Thus, through a literary discovery, Esperanza utilizes the power of the
written word to rewrite her history, just as Cisneros uses her art to re-tell
the story of Mexican women, whose portrayal in male literature has often
been misleading. Frankie abandons her frigid detachment. On the other
hand Holden and Augie, understand better both themselves and the nature
of their society. The ordeal experienced in different ways by the various
characters — more significantly stressed in the case of the two heroines,
Esperanza and Frankie — is a sign of their spiritual growth.

The experience of reading serves as a final resource to define a
texts essential nature. Beneath all the problems of adolescents and
responsibility lies the issue that most profoundly concerns the writers:
"the relative power and validity of inner versus outer reality." The
novelists although they describe protagonists at various stages between
introspection and apparent unawareness of inner experience, testify to the
shaping power of the psychic life. Augie's lack of forethought and
speculation and concern of consequences get him in trouble. His fantasies
about the women who attract him determine many of his actions; more
important, his consistent imagining of obligation to others seems to lead
to his maturity. The jovial, mocking tone of his narration insists on the
possibilities of imagination as directed by art to affect understanding and
action. The novelistic enterprise involves the attempt to form reader's
imagination; it reflects on the redirection and increased control of
Augie's fantasy life. He himself as a character comes dimly to understand the importance of his imaginings to his actions. The case is more obvious with Frankie, whose elaborately developed fantasies ultimately come to control her vision of life. In a simple sense the plots of all the fictions considered here involve a pattern of wish-fulfillment for the central characters. They get to write their story, to win control of the readers, and to demonstrate their own reality. Here is the most fundamental optimism of this novelistic mode which affirms the possibility of the stable identity of the individual and his/her ultimate power to shape the world he/she experiences. To tell one's story, as these men and women do, thus becomes an affirmation of power, even when the story contains emphatic defeats or evidence of limitation or revelations of folly. To set down a frank interpretation of personal experience declares autonomy and demonstrates the dominance of inner life, although the narrators' announced concern may be with external happening. In these novels, as in life, the claims of society counter those of the psyche. Frankie embodies the most definite statement of society's power to control and to destroy individual dreams. But every writer in this study recognizes at some level, the problem involved in the individual's efforts to establish a viable relation to his social context. That the solution is often escape — in a psychic sense — only emphasizes the insolubility of the problem.
Holden and Augie, Esperanza and Frankie come to terms with the demands implied and stated by their social world but not without authorial recognition of the cost in freedom and self-assertion. All these adolescents with their intuitive vision of reality affirm in far reaching ways the significance of their inner freedom, a kind of ‘escape through imagination.’ This “escape through imagination is not escapist but strategic, a withdrawal into the unconscious for the purpose of personal transformation.” The denouement of the Bildungsroman, a generally open-ended conclusion, only reveals the potential for forming adolescent life in accordance with their convictions and desires. A distinctive "I" implies the adolescents own value system and developmental goals which are ultimately realized in terms of community and empathy rather than achievement and autonomy. The possibility and the usefulness of autonomy, of separateness, thus pre-occupy at some level of consciousness all the writers. Stating their self-definitions, the writers not only strike some balance between the opposed principles of selfhood and society, but they also express the instability of any such balance. To convey questionings and convictions, writers require “artifices of sincerity and truthfulness” (Spacks, 1976, p.310). They depend upon artifice — shaping, inventing, selecting, and omitting — to achieve their goal of conveying vital truths. To tell a story of the self is — as this study
has argued in various ways — 'to create a fiction.' We have discovered
the unity of action in these novels; it derives from the central character's
singleness of expectation, desire, or will: to discover, defend, assert, and
manufacture the self. These novels show that the same existential
problems that affect the contemporary men affect women, too. To
compare these four novels of adolescence is to invite contemplation of
the multifarious and often surprising affinities that exist within the
context of manifest difference. This, finally, is the center of the
perception achieved by such a comparative study. Selfhood and
consistent identity, whether by sheer illusion-making or through
collaboration with experienced reality, is the underlying obsession and
final achievement of the literary imagination in these novels. It provides
the ground on which the complex relationship of subjective vision and
verifiable truth enacts itself.

Amidst the welter of possible interpretations, these writers make us
experience mystery in the universe, by making us experience mystery in
their work of art. The “mystic meaning”\textsuperscript{52} of events is not in the events
themselves or determined by them, but in the observer. It seems these
writers, in their own way, came to share Goethe’s reflection that “the
acting man is always without conscience, no one has conscience but the
observing man.”\textsuperscript{53} If nothing else, the novels at least show the “birth of a
These writers show how adolescents oppressed by violence, racism and sexual discrimination embark on an odyssey which takes them away from a state of being victimized to a consciousness that allows them a glimpse “into the mechanism of existence.”

At the end of these narratives, underlying the typical ambiguity is an assured sense of the seriousness of life. The most comforting note is that there has been a catharsis and a revelation of the shared condition of existence. The least comforting is the promise that while the anxiety of human pain remains, there is an attending loss of innocence. The novels endings seem to suggest that the loss of the belief in human innocence is a necessary step toward redemption, and that suffering precedes the essential knowledge that must be acquired. The novels subtly yet persistently invoke new possibilities for human behavior. In these troubled times, if the next generation is to succeed both its women and men must take adult responsibility for the survival of a human society.

Dostoyevsky summarizes a persistent and paradoxical problem of the modern intellectual rebel when he has Ivan Karamazov reply to his saintly brother, “Rebellion? I’m sorry to hear you say that … one can’t go on living in a state of rebellion, and I want to live.” Rebellion, one can argue, is its own justification and, since man is never free enough, the social order never fair enough, and the cosmos never meaningful enough,
the defiance of adolescents remains permanently desirable and necessary. In insisting on the value of their defiance one should not, of course, deny the importance of their messages, which takes such directions: as the pleasure of the instinctual life, the endless falsity and corruptibility of all institutions, the inadequacies of all ideologies, the value and rightness of the individual against the collectivity. If existence is worth affirming, then defiance against the perpetually arbitrary limits imposed on life, also constitutes meaningful and pleasurable living proper to these brave young adolescents. All these stories can be seen as “a shaft driven straight into the heart of human experiences.” Clearly the insights offered by these adolescents’ become perceptions, which are important to all of us. Fiction as Miles has asserted: “does not only reflect and record experience; it defines and delineates it too.” Further, he asserts “to go outward; to develop a sense of community, to look to moral rather than to emotional dimension; to make the right choice, and to make it work, these are not only the tasks of women but of all writers” (p.6).

The selection of adolescents and their journey inward may seem arbitrary and the study does not make any claim to a definitive conclusion. Perhaps someone else would interpret these same novels differently, because meaning is polysemous, based on a fusion of the reader with the text. Or perhaps changes in the structure of masculinity
and feminist lie within the changing audience rather than a changing text. Our knowledge, like the adolescent himself, remains perplexed and limited. Whatever the ultimate destiny of these characters, the authors do not have them bow out with simple answers to the difficult questions of being human. They know there aren't any such answers. Each writer succeeds in establishing a rapport of feeling, an aura of “shared experience.” In effect, this study has attempted through close investigation of individual texts, to arrive at some preliminary understanding of the shared common modes of novels of adolescence: an important bond of shared assumptions, shared techniques, and shared demands on the reader and to show “…how heavily the path ahead is obscured by fog, how infinite are the number of directions which the course of events may take.”

The synthesis, or final element, of the dichotomy between loss and restoration does not occur within the individual novel or even in the field as a whole but in the mind of the reader. It is the development of different kinds of introspection and the astonishing variety of the journey devised for each new wanderer that is the measure of the writers’ genius and the constant delight of the readers. These new generations of young people show their shared sense of a quest, of a journey through darkness to light. It is a journey or pilgrimage, “a winding path toward the light, leading through stretches of beauty,
bleakness and gloom, and ending in the glow of “the changeless centre” of each protagonist in a “journey towards stillness” (Richardson, IV, 470). Such is the identity the adolescents seek: “a unity and persistence of consciousness.”

These novels of adolescence are too complex and many-sided to be reducible to a thesis and a conclusion. If there is any conclusion derivable from these novels, it is that it welcomes opacity, remembering Eliot’s words:

Knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.

As these adolescents free themselves from being “typecast as masculine and feminine, and embrace the best characteristics of both genders, they rise to a higher level of self-perception and understanding never before realized” (423). Self-realization comes for them through achieving a wholeness and unity of being. As they mature, their inner directed light continues to reconcile the inner and outer world: veering from despair to joy, from fear of failure to happiness in the sheer fact of existence. These writers have impelled their adolescents into lives of action, defining themselves and their society by the choices they make; wanderers who weave themselves as “connecting string[s] into the tapestry of episodic life, helping us see the pattern as well” (Radiant
Daughters, p.171). No longer attracted to wide vistas of freedom, they seek an inner freedom leading to an "artistic reflection" wherein the true goal of their journey is revealed. The quest has led them to some unknown vista, and true to their inner directed light they create their life. The essential role of these artists has been to awaken a concern, for "the human essences forgotten in a distracted world." They plead for "the transcendence of art" as "an attempt to find in the universe what is fundamental and enduring" and to lead us "to sacred states of the soul." A person’s remaining hope is to return to his inner self.
End Notes


12 Franco Moretti, op. cit., Ch.4, 'The Conspiracy of the Innocents', p.185.


23 Quoted from R. Theobald (pseudonym for Dorothy Richardson), "My Words" *Adelphi*. August, 1925, p. 152.


31 Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 248 examines a number of women writers and spiritual quests in their works, and finds the "experience of nothingness is central in each." The experience is analogous to "The mystic's descent into the "dark of the soul."


45 Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (Coward McCann 1966), pp. 192-3.


51 Carol P Christ, "Spiritual Quest and Women's Experience" Anima 1, No. 2. Spring 1975, pp.4-14.


55 Quoted by G. Jean Aubry: Joseph Conrad Life and Letters 1, p.323.


