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Solitude is a condition that affects everyone. Even more than this, the vocabulary we use to describe solitude varies from loneliness to isolation to alienation, but in its essence, solitude refers to the different physical, mental, and emotional states of being alone. In his collection of essays, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican philosopher Octavio Paz states that “Self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone.” The implications of this statement are twofold: one, that self-discovery and solitude are intricately connected, and two, that after achieving self-actualization, we are aware of our inherent aloneness. Contrasted against the critical theoretical works of Octavio Paz and Robert Ferguson, the ten pieces of American and Latino literature that I analyze indicate that solitude can be prompted by the realization that a character is discontented with their current situation and in turn, seek out solitude. In other cases, this state of being is forced upon a character by their circumstance, forcing them to confront and reflect on the causes and consequences of their solitude. As a result, the character must make a conscious decision to seek out self-discovery or to move forward without further developing their identity. By further analyzing how the state of solitude is confronted in literature and used as a tool to reach self-discovery, we can begin to explain our countervailing need to communicate with one another and to understanding our distinct humanity.
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INTRODUCTION

Solitude is an enduring human condition, and its themes have been reflected in literature as early as biblical times, when Adam was given Eve as a companion. However, the experience of being alone is termed differently from writer to writer, person to person. In the English language, solitude, loneliness, isolation, and alienation all have similar meanings; when one of these words is used, it is understood that one is without the company of another. The word “solitude,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means the state of being or living alone, though it often has more positive, sometimes more artistic connotations. On the opposite end of the spectrum, “alienation” means estrangement, connoting a more negative, hostile state of being. While one is distinctly more positive than the other, in some cases, neither are appealing to experience.

The dominant American ideology has always championed individualism and valued self-reliance, resulting in a paradoxical culture comprised of isolated individuals. In *Alone in America: The Stories That Matter*, Robert Ferguson reasons that America’s rampant individualism is “the answer as well as the problem to feeling alone” (Ferguson 5). Therefore, the natural isolation that everyone feels is immediately excused by the individualistic need to become self-made. But, as Ferguson writes, “the plight of the lonely is so insidious because it exists quietly in plain sight” (Ferguson 9). Since it is masked by individualism, the issue of solitude is often overlooked, especially in American literature.

Within the Latinx communities in the United States, the approach to solitude is vastly different. In his collection of essays, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the Mexican philosopher and poet Octavio Paz says that “self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone” (Paz 9).
In his analysis of the Mexican people, Paz implies that it is absolutely necessary for humans to embrace their solitary state, in order to find their true selves. In the utter realization of “our lack of another” (Paz 195), man becomes more aware of himself. Paz, whose thought has been deeply influential throughout Latin America and among U.S. Latinx intellectuals and writers, also believes that we are meant to overcome our solitude through communion. In this way, the dominant American ideology and the Latinx approach to solitude differs greatly: the dominant American solution is to avoid solitude in a way that normalizes the discomfort of feeling alone, while the Latinx approach is to use solitude to create and develop an identity and move toward community.

Paz’s reflections on solitude were made in relation to Mexican culture; Writers such as James Sallis primarily provides a perspective of solitude in American literature and culture. Sallis writes that American society often equates individualism and solitude. Oftentimes to the average American, individualism refers to “me-ism” (Sallis 102), indicating an intent to live life without the consideration of others. Sallis suggests that instead of a withdrawal from society, individualism should convey a precarious balance between the individual and society. In understanding the origins and development of both ideologies, modern readers can use this information not only to understand other people better, but also themselves. Without a balance, as Sallis proposes, an individual will remain in a constant struggle between society and self.

In this study, I contrast the American’s individualism and the Mexican’s solitude against their need for solidarity. Why do people seek the companionship of others, especially through literature? I will also investigate the theme of solitude in American literature to determine the effects it produces amongst its writers and readers. Additionally, I analyze solitude in the Latinx
literary context to compare its role between two cultures. My argument will be divided into four sections: Critical Theory, American Works, Latinx Works, and a Synthesis.

Definitions

It is necessary to clearly define the differences between terms often used interchangeably in the literature of solitude: solitude, loneliness, isolation and alienation. For the purposes of this study, the definitions of these words will not deviate significantly from the definitions and connotations that society has previously created for them. They are as follows, as seen in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

**Solitude**: The state of being or living alone; loneliness, seclusion, solitariness (of persons).

**Loneliness**: Want of society or company; the condition of being alone or solitary; solitariness, loneness.

**Isolation**: The action of isolating; the fact or condition of being isolated or standing alone; separation from other things or persons; solitariness.

**Alienation**: Estrangement; the state of being estranged or alienated. Originally regarding estrangement from God; or, derangement of mental faculties or processes; madness, insanity; delirium; an instance or episode of this. In later use, more fully mental alienation.

Each term encompasses a different aspect of solitude: “solitude” refers to the general state of being, “loneliness” to feelings of being alone, “isolation” to the physical experience of being alone, and “alienation” to an existential condition forced upon someone. In addition, the terms “alienation” and “isolation” are closer in meaning and indicate a more physical aloneness.
It is also necessary to have a brief discussion about a quote that I use as part of the foundation for my study. In The Labyrinth of Solitude, Octavio Paz states that “Self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone” (Paz 9). Originally, Paz’s essays were written in Spanish, so the translation of soledad to the English version of his essay that I read should be investigated. The use of soledad, which is defined in the Real Academia Española as “carencia voluntaria o involuntaria de compañía; o pesar y melancolía que se sienten por la ausencia, muerte o pérdida de alguien o de algo” (the voluntary or involuntary lack of companionship; or the grief and sadness that one feels as a result of the absence, death, or loss of someone or something) [translation mine], indicates that Paz uses aloneness/loneliness/solitude interchangeably. My own use of the term solitude will differ from Paz’s, in that I am more specific in my vocabulary regarding solitude.

Synthesis

In Solitude: A Human Condition, I investigate why and how literature is a way through which humans confront their solitude. The results of this study will not only expand the field of literature and explain humans’ tendency to turn to the written word in search of companionship, but it will also give us a deeper understanding of ourselves and others. As humans better understand their inevitable struggles and how to overcome them, they will arrive at self-understanding. This study will also reveal how different cultural traditions – the American and U.S. Latinx – encounter and react to each other through solitude. I hope that my insights will improve intercultural exchanges, despite the fundamentally solitary state in which humans find themselves. Now, in a time when American society seems so divided, it is important to understand and recognize the shared ways that cultures confront their solitude.
SECTION I
CRITICAL THEORY

Over the years, the idea of “solitude” and everything that it encompasses – its causes and effects – has garnered a lot of attention. From sociology to psychology to literature, many authors have tried to understand why it seems to be such a prevailing condition. In the following literature review, I will discuss the major studies of solitude and link its importance to my study. This information will add value to my analysis of the Latinx and American texts, but also bolster the general, basic understanding of solitude and its counterparts, which include alienation, loneliness, and isolation.

Solitude takes many forms and affects different groups of people in various ways, but ultimately it is a persistent and constant state of being that aids or afflicts humans in their daily activities. The philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Octavio Paz, who lived in different times and places, both acknowledged and accepted that “the necessity of solitude…is organic” (Emerson 3) and that “solitude is a hard fact. We are truly different. And we are truly alone” (Paz 19). Solitude is a fundamental part of human experience, making it a condition everyone must resolve on their own terms. Furthermore, solitude is a uniquely human characteristic: “Man is the only being who knows he is alone…Therefore, when he is aware of himself he is aware of his lack of another, that is, of his solitude” (Paz 195). This awareness drives humans in each action they initiate; consequently, solitude can either be detrimental to an individual’s life or help them in ways that no other experience can.

The experience of solitude is prompts individuals to find a companion. Yet, to know that we want and desire a companion implicitly indicates that we are aware that we do not have
‘another.’ We are called to transcend our solitude and overcome it by seeking out companionship (Paz 195). We seek genuine human connection because “It is not the circumstance of seeing more or fewer people, but the readiness of sympathy, that imports” (Emerson 7). This inherent need to escape and transcend our solitude drives us to establish true, lasting relationships and it is through literature that we make our first attempts at this.

Though we are all familiar with solitude, different cultures experience different manifestations of it. American solitude may affect a large population of those who live in America, but the diversity that we enjoy in America makes large generalization impossible. Thus, in my study I compare American literature with Latinx literature for two reasons. First and foremost, this study is inspired by Octavio Paz, who, in describing the Mexican people and culture, felt inclined to integrate solitude into many of his theories and essays, ultimately creating *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. For this reason alone, his readership gathers that a sense of solitude is common among not only the Mexican people, but those of Hispanic origin living in the United States. The second reason for comparing American and Latinx literature stems from the unique blend of cultures that United States Latinx share, as a result producing a contrasting form of solitude from the culture of the dominant United States. Because both immigrants and second or third generation Latinx people struggle with solitude in a unique manner, making comparisons with the dominant American will provide a more comprehensive analysis of solitude.

To begin a well-informed discussion of United States Latinx people it is important to consider the cultural conditions in which they live. Typically, there are concentrated areas of Latinx communities close to the United States-Mexico border and in major cities across the U.S. Thus, the border as a concept and condition is important. As Gloria Anzaldúa, a poet, writer, and critical theorist, describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a border is supposed to be a dividing line
between two places, but the borderlands are “the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third
country – a border culture” (Anzaldúa 25). The borderlands and the people who live there create
a place where cultures run together and a new one is created. Many Latinx, no matter their
location, often live in conceptual borderlands; they grow up in a dual culture, surrounded by both
Mexican and American traditions and feel pressured to choose one or the other. As a result, a
new distinct form of solitude emerges and afflicts Latinx.

In order to understand how solitude is manifested as a result of this border culture, we
first need an understanding of the historical and cultural background of Mexican-American
literature. Leticia Garza-Falcón explains that the solitude of borderlanders materializes when
Latinx people are thrust into an “impersonal and individualistic” culture, after coming from a
“community- and family-oriented” one (44). After relocating to the United States in search of a
better life, immigrants are forced to give up their cultural and familial values, making it difficult
to find a community to thrive in. As I discuss later, Richard Rodriguez confirms this theory with
his own experiences. As a minority living in a segregated America, he must take responsibility
for his intellectual development at the expense of being ridiculed by both the Latinx and
American cultures. Garza-Falcón theorizes that the “solitude suffered as a result of the absence
of a community, the absence of a holistic sense of belonging” is a characteristic of the
communities described in many Latinx works of literature (48). The solitude that often emerges
in Latinx literature is a result of a longing for more in a world that intentionally makes Latinx
feel out of place. In either case, after immigrating in search of a better life or feeling out of place
in the dominant American culture because of a Latinx heritage, the loss of community and
belonging is the price to be paid. When faced with this cultural solitude each immigrant or
Latinx character must make the conscious decision to continue to live in this solitude, to
assimilate to the American culture and risk rejection of their Mexican counterparts, or find a way to establish a new community through the creation of a dual-identity.

Just as the solitude Latinx experience is very particular to their circumstances, the American-inflected solitude is also unique. Solitude is perceived as “absence – emptiness, formlessness, the night,” as James Sallis, an American writer, explains in his essay, “American Solitude” (Sallis 103). He further discusses the conflict that Americans face in their solitude: Americans are discontent to find themselves alone and without others, as opposed to being alone with themselves. For this reason, many people find it paradoxical to find themselves alone in the company of others. Sallis argues that this aversion to being alone with ourselves produces societal uniformity because in the company of others, we learn how to be “American”. Consequently, we are in danger of never truly developing an authentic identity. The American characters that I study often find themselves trying to belong to a society that does not accept them. The conformity that they yearn for is impossible to find because their inherent characteristics, desires, and/or beliefs conflict with those of American society. In this situation, they are put in a place of solitude at the price of conformity.

In *Alone in America: The Stories That Matter*, Robert Ferguson theorizes that Americans’ solitude derives from the individualistic tendencies of the early colonists, an observation made by Alexis de Tocqueville in the “Individualism in Democratic Countries” section of *Democracy in America*. Ferguson writes, “A separating individualism thrives on leveling tendencies, distrust of authority, suspicion of others, narrow social engagement, and a presentism that loses interest in relationships across time” (Ferguson 4). The individualism that de Tocqueville noticed developing in the colonies has led to a need for a personal freedom that is not constructive, but alienating. In the American context, “Individualism thus becomes the answer as well as the
problem to feeling alone, and it soon translates into a series of fables about the solitary adventurer and its social variant, the self-made man” (Ferguson 5). De Tocqueville illustrates that democracy threatens man, not because of the increased autonomy it promotes, but because an individual is further separated from his neighbors, as he is determined to depend only on himself. As he/she further retreats into a “this is what is best for me” ideology, he is “threatened in the end to confine himself entirely within the solitude of his own heart” (Tocqueville 121). This individualism can influence the culture of a nation, just as we have seen in the United States. Though the tenets of individualism are not negative, some of its unintended consequences have distanced neighbor from neighbor and may presage the origins of American solitude.

Mordechai Rotenberg provides further insight in “‘Alienating-Individualism’ and ‘Reciprocal Individualism,’ the United States has developed an antagonistic individualism that destroys society, rather than builds it. The qualities that characterize individualism, like “independence, self-determination, personal freedom or even aloneness are in no way negative qualities” rather, it is the people who create negativity (Rotenburg 6). His analysis provides insight to the alienation that the Western world brings on itself. As Rotenberg discusses, individualism need not be psychologically damaging in any context. A discussion of alienation, however, must be appropriately examined in the United States Latina/o context, as many Latinx face alienation in American society.

The alienation in the Latinx context is prevailing and universal among Latinx people living in the United States. In his essay, “Solace in Solitude: An American Adamic Alienation and José Antonio Villareal’s Pocho,” Timothy Sedore describes how the author José Antonio Villareal, like many other Latinx authors, “tell[s] stories of solitude-bound protagonists in motion, holding to the ideal that there is, ultimately, a place of transcendence to be found on the
American landscape…perpetually arriving, they are on a perpetual search; they never arrive” (Sedore 240). As literature often imitates life, this is an alienation familiar to Latinx people living in the United States; they are caught in the middle. Sedore explains that the Latinx immigrant’s character is trapped in a paradox, never fully being re-accepted by the home culture, but never fully being able to adapt to the American one. As a result, “The pocho is in a place apart – alienated – and is engaged in an idealistic searching for a special destiny – the whole of the American Adamic inheritance, regardless of whether it is achievable, obtainable, tangible, or satisfying” (Sedore 248). The Latinx is stuck on a journey, but will never arrive at her/his destination without facing discomfort. We see these words echoed in Tomas Rivera’s ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him; a migrant worker comments, “the real truth is that I’m tired of arriving. Arriving and leaving…I really should say when we don’t arrive because that’s the real truth. We never arrive” (Rivera 145). It seems that Latinx people, especially those who have immigrated, continually face the issue of never finding belonging in the dominant American society.

Many of the Latinx works I study not only emphasize the alienation Latinx experience, but these accounts also revolve around young kids. This validates Octavio Paz’s theory that “children and adults can transcend their solitude and forget themselves in games or work. The adolescent, however, vacillates between infancy and youth, halting for a moment before the infinite richness of the world” (Paz 9). Suzanne Gordon, a healthcare journalist, echoes this sentiment in her book, Lonely in America. She describes adolescence as a lonely time in which “You no longer want to depend on your parents, but there is little sense of self to cling to” (Gordon 58). Many of the main characters that I study, like in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, are traveling through adolescence into adulthood. The adolescents in the works of literature
that I read often face a form of solitude; it is at this point in their lives that they have the experience of childhood behind them, but still face the uncertainty of adulthood. In this struggle of loneliness, they have the unique opportunity to approach solitude all the while creating their own identity.

It is not uncommon to read about the loneliness that adolescents experience on the journey to self-discovery. Psychologist Charlotte Buhler explains in her essay, “Loneliness in Maturity,” that “In modern times, [solitude] acquires the qualities of loneliness to the extent that the adolescent becomes painfully conscious of his isolation and of the need to find closeness and understanding” (Buhler 169). These feelings of loneliness stem from a desire for companionship, a need to create a bond with another human being. Literature has undoubtedly been a way for adolescents to find solace in these overwhelming feelings, so they know they are not alone.

Though the works that I read and analyze are not written by young people, these novels’ characters often turn to creative writing as a place of contemplation. In this way, whether or not their work is read immediately, the possibility of connecting with another human being has been opened. Equally as often, “loneliness may come through the loss of a person who has been giving direction, support, a hold, a belonging without one knowing it” (Buhler 174). After knowing what true companionship is, the loss of a close relative or friend suddenly opens a gaping hole of loneliness. This is most seen in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, when the narrator, Yunior, writes his manuscript in response to the death of Oscar. For Yunior, it is the only way to properly memorialize Oscar’s life. Again, literature becomes a place of refuge for those who find themselves grieving the loss of those they love.

It is also important to discuss the difference between artistic solitude and loneliness because one is actively sought out and the other is not. Suzanne Gordon criticizes the
sociological loneliness that plagues America and the stigmas that cloud it. The unwilling lonely person finds her or himself in the “midst of chaos, negativity, hopelessness,” a state they have not chosen to be in, as the artist might. Rather, “that loneliness is felt as an imposition from outside, over whose comings and goings there is no control” (Gordon 41). As seen in The House on Mango Street, though Esperanza, the main character, is lost on her way to create a Chicana identity for herself, she finds that creative writing is a medium, that allows her to analyze and process the world around her, including her traditional macho father. The sought out solitude that she seeks out as a writer allows her to understand the world around her. Esperanza may not be able to control his decisions and beliefs, but she can rationalize and disagree with him in the solitude that she seeks out. This is a significant difference from solitude that is not sought out because, as humans, we all like to feel that we have some amount of control in our lives, but the chaos of loneliness makes this impossible.

Finally, my research on solitude shows that mental illness and solitude are intimately connected. Literature allows writers and readers to explore this blurry, and often taboo, topic. Mental illness is both a cause of solitude; those who struggle with maintaining their mental health are alienated because they are seen as unstable. As mental health researchers, Britt-Marie Lindgren, et al., explain in their research, the mental health patients that participated in her study described their experiences with loneliness and mental illness as “being on one side of a frosted window” (Lindgren et al. 116). This experiences with mental illness and solitude are echoed in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar, however, rather than use a frosted window to describe her experience, the main character, Esther, uses a bell jar to chronical her journey of mental illness. The bell jar not only forces her to “stew in her own sour air” (Plath 185), but it distorts the world around her. Through therapy, she is able to lift the bell jar above her head and be exposed to
circulating air, but there is always the threat of its imminent descent (Plath 241). Lindgren et al.
concludes that mentally ill people face a double stigma because of their mental illness, but also
because socializing with lonely people is undesirable (119). In turning to literature to describe
her own bouts with mental illness through Esther, Sylvia Plath takes the first step in practicing
this people-centered approach. Not only is she requesting that she, herself, be heard, but she is
also allowing other people with similar experiences to be seen. The experience of loneliness that
a mentally ill person has might be doubly traumatizing, however, literature can be the beginning
of the journey back to stability.

If solitude is a basic human characteristic, an awareness of its repetition in literature will
help us to be more aware of the motives behind our actions. As indicated in this literature review,
solitude, the state of being physically, mentally, or emotionally alone can be prompted by the
realization that a character is unhappy with their current situation and, in turn, sought out. In
other cases, this state of being is forced upon a character by their circumstance, forcing them to
confront and reflect on the causes and consequences of their solitude. As a result, the character
must make a conscious decision to seek out self-discovery, or to move forward without
developing their identity. The works of critical theory that define solitude label it as an inevitable
condition that cannot be overcome. My analysis of the works of literature I study indicates that
the characters who struggle with solitude can overcome the differences with society they
identify; it is through this process that they create a unique identity and find their authentic self.
SECTION II
AMERICAN WORKS

Solitude is an ever-present facet of American society and through literature, readers observe how it is confronted by different groups. I will focus on two aspects of solitude in American literature: the first involves facing solitude in the struggle to find belonging in a community; and the second wrestles with solitude as it is approached through the expected roles of women in society. In both cases, solitude appears as characters struggle to escape the loneliness and/or isolation they experience.

The repetition of solitude in American literature forces characters to confront what sets them apart from the norm. The sense of solitude compels characters to develop and approach the path to self-discovery. Marilynne Robinson’s *Lila*, William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, and Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* exemplify the journey to self-discovery. The characters of these novels – Lila, Joe Christmas, Lena, and Harry Morgan, respectively – are estranged from society and attempt to find a place for themselves within their community. Lila, as a nomad and transient, is unable to blend in to the town of Gilead; Joe Christmas, due to his mixed heritage, is not accepted in the Great Depression era society in which he lives; and Harry Morgan, as a poor fisherman living in Florida, is unable to provide for his family. Consequently, each character faces solitude as a result of his or her own differences, but each faces a different fate. Lila marries Gilead’s town reverend and manages to adjust to town-living, Joe Christmas, unable to recognize his need for belonging, is eventually killed in a shoot-out, and Harry Morgan dies in an attempt to smuggle Cuban revolutionaries for some extra money. Lila faces a different outcome than Joe and Harry because when faced with solitude, she makes the conscious decision
to use it in a productive way. Instead of running from town to town like Joe, or relying on illegal activity to make a living like Harry, she uses her solitude to reflect on how to become a better citizen in Gilead and how to use her differences, as a transient, to her advantage.

**The Male Character and Solitude in American Literature**

Characters of American literature struggle with the isolation that can be a product of a stark difference between socioeconomic statuses. The story of Harry Morgan, the main character of Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*, demonstrates how common it is for a character like Harry to feel disenfranchised by the American government in its failure to provide good-paying jobs to those left impoverished, specifically by the Great Depression (Hemingway 96). In this way, the isolation Harry experiences as a poor man in Key West portrays the much more universal familiarity with poverty that many Americans endure. Though he is an American living along the coast of Florida, Harry identifies more with the radical ideologies of the Cuban revolutionaries that he helps to smuggle. On the other hand, the difference in the socioeconomic status between writers who live on the island and the impoverished Conchs like Harry outlines the stark distinction between the two social classes and the resulting alienation that might occur.

Differences in socioeconomic status transcend extreme times like the Great Depression and are experienced by a diverse group of people at all times. Sometimes this isolation can be seen geographically, in towns where it is possible to “live on the wrong side of the tracks.” The isolation that results from experiences of poverty is not only physically isolating, but it is also alienating. Sidney Finkelstein explains in *Existentialism and Alienation in American* that class antagonism “is a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt toward something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself” (137). As readers see in *To Have and*
*Have Not*, Harry, along with others like him who live in poverty, wrestles with the impossibility of community while facing exploitation, an experience that afflicts many impoverished communities.

Groups on the margins of society, like those living under poverty levels, must decide how to confront the isolation they experience as a result of their economic situation. Harry’s battle with poverty mirrors that of the Cubans. In Cuba, American imperialism widened the gap between the rich and the poor (Hemingway 166). Both groups, the impoverished people of Key West and the Cuban people, have been forced to make ends meet by way of illegal activities. As both Americans and Cubans are forced to make a living without the aid of either government, they must overcome their isolation in order to succeed, by any means possible. This isolation, however, triggers two distinct responses. The only solution that Harry can find is to resort to illegal activity. Though this action is also motivated by the desperate need for money, Harry also hurts the American economy by endorsing the black market. On the other hand, the Cubans’ solution is to overthrow the government once and for all. This isolation elicits two different responses from different groups; one is to underhandedly participate in a community that will not accept illegal activities and the other is to violently overthrow the existing government and its American allies. As he lay dying, Harry realizes that without the support of community, a single man alone has no chance of succeeding (Hemingway 225). In the end, it was impossible for Harry to overcome his alienation while being taken advantage of.

Most often, the representation of solitude signals change or development within a character. As seen in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, Joe Christmas struggles with conforming to the ‘pure white’ male identity that society expects of him. Eventually, Joe finds himself traveling along the same “lonely street”, following the same pattern of drinking, eating,
sleeping with women, and moving on to the next town in his attempt to build a life for himself (Faulkner 223). In this endless cycle of monotony, “[Christmas] thought it was loneliness he was trying to escape and not himself” (Faulkner 226). Joe so desperately wanted to find belonging in his community that he strived to always be surrounded by people and participate in an activity. He avoided loneliness because it reminded him that he did not have a support system. Readers are aware that Joe’s struggle to fit into the society he lived in began during childhood. As a young orphan, Joe constructed the memories he preferred to believe as true, which did not include a mixed heritage (Faulkner 119). Here, readers become aware that the loneliness that Joe experiences will change who he is, for better or worse. An outcast of society, Joe spends a lot of time alone, but never used this solitude to achieve self-discovery. Years later, after reflection and coming to terms with his bi-racial heritage, Joe begins his journey to self-actualization. The crucial turning point is in the conscious decision he made to confront his feelings of loneliness and the periods of physical isolation that he experienced. Previously, he refused to acknowledge that he might not meet society’s standard and he isolates himself further from any chance of genuine companionship, a time characterized by denial and violence. Despite being given the resources and time, Joe never engaged with his journey to find identity and he made a conscious decision to run from his “loneliness,” and in turn, running from himself.

**The Female Character and Solitude in American Literature**

Solitude in American literature is a way for women to overcome their situation to achieve the goal they set for themselves. For example, in *Light in August*, Lena Grove uses the solitude that she experiences to plan a life for herself. A pregnant, single woman, Lena leaves her hometown in search for the father of her child, Lucas Burch. Lena, after beginning the journey to find Mr. Burch, explains that though the initial parts of her journey are solitary, she “’reckons a
family ought to all be together when a chap comes. Specially the first one. I reckon the Lord will see to that”” (Faulkner 21). The loneliness of Lena’s journey represents the struggle of many women as they find themselves unexpectedly pregnant. However, in Lena’s case, she was triggered to action and moved out of her brother’s house to build a life of her own.

Oftentimes, the female characters directly contrast the unsuccessful attempt of their male counterparts to achieve self-discovery. Lena’s determination to make the best decisions for her child’s future is compared to Joe Christmas’ tendency to run away from his problems. Similarly, Lila was strong enough to evaluate her situation and confront a solitary journey, in the hopes of creating a life for herself. Lena embarks on her path to self-discovery because she was able to keep the bigger goal in mind. In the example of Lena, the solitude that she experienced reflected her willingness to stay true to herself. At first, it was not actively sought out, but it was embraced by Lena as something that needed to be confronted.

Solitude also provides women with the opportunity to reflect upon and possibly question their role within marriage, family, and society. For example, Edna Pontellier, in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, feels trapped in her marriage as a result of the patriarchal society in which she lives. In her moments alone, she realizes “she had apprehended instinctively the dual life – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin 18); Edna begins even more to retreat inside of herself all the while participating in her regular life. This duality is emphasized as Edna actively seeks solitude away from her family and husband. The solitude and aloneness that Edna sought, independent of her family, represents the larger struggle that women experience in order to become their own persons. The societal standards of the era in which Edna lived, however, prevented women from doing this. Rather, society viewed solitude as something to be avoided, and encouraged women to dedicate this time to their family. It is only through the
portrayal of strong women like Edna, that women realized there was another option for themselves – to use solitude to create their authentic identities. In the case of Edna, she concludes that she must leave her husband and family to be truly happy and live as the person she desired, requiring her to defy social custom and divorce her husband.

It is often through solitude that our true identity is created, but this state of being creates a conflict as the people around us are forced to adapt to the new self that we create. For example, all the while Edna is undergoing this character development, her husband failed to realize “she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world” (Chopin 77). In her solitude, Edna created two identities for herself: one, her fictitious self, the self that fulfilled all that society expected; and the second, her true self, the self that allowed her to pursue her most genuine, deepest desires. On the other hand, Mr. Pontellier does not show any understanding or similar character development at all and expects her to conform to the patriarchal standards of society. Edna’s “absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him” (Chopin 76). This contrast between Edna and her husband’s experiences implies that in her retreat toward solitude, Edna is finally discovering her true self. Her husband is unable to recognize and accept the fact that Edna is undergoing this transformation and is unable to identify this change because he, himself, is not familiar with such an evolution. Rather, “he takes such withdrawal [from society and womanly obligations] as a sign not of strength but of weakness” (Gordon 34). Edna was able to see past social expectations and use solitude as a method to contemplate her journey to her true self. In this situation, solitude is a causal agent of Edna’s realization that to be herself, she must pursue her deepest desires – to live freely in a world where she does not always have a role to fill.
The solitude that Edna overwhelmingly experiences is manifested in nature. She is seduced by the voice of the vast sea (Chopin 18); it seems that solitude, just like the sea, is entrancing and unavoidable. Here, nature takes on its role as relentless and overwhelming in its appeal to Edna, as the sea remains an ever-present entity calling her toward “the mazes of inward contemplation.” In this way, Chopin echoes the theories of Octavio Paz and Ralph Waldo Emerson: solitude is a natural and unavoidable condition. At the end of the novel, Edna realizes that the society she lives in will not accept her, should she leave her husband and family for another man. This inward conflict alienates her from the world around her and requires that she take action to change her circumstances. Edna ultimately decides that rather than fact further alienation after leaving her husband, she would rather answer the call of the sea. Her implied suicide indicates to readers that she consciously chooses to not continue to seek self-discovery nor ignore the path that her solitude laid out for her. Edna, in response to loneliness, embraces the solitude and engulfing enormity that she finds in the ocean.

It is also through the story of Lila, in Marilynne Robinson’s book of the same name, that readers observe solitude associated with nature. Lila is homeless, traveling from place to place, often just camping out. After losing her companion and closest individual she had to a family, Lila stops outside the town of Gilead, staying in an abandoned shack. “It was probably loneliness that made her walk the mile or so into town every few days just to look at the houses and stores and the flower gardens” (Robinson 27). Lila avoids the forced solitude by seeking out companionship in any form. Though it is in nature and solitude that Lila often feels most comfortable and like herself, it even becomes unbearable for her after time passes. This situation demonstrates humans’ most basic need for companionship despite the extreme comfort a
character, like Lila, feels in solitude. In Lila’s case, since she traveled through undeveloped areas, much of her life was intricately connected with the basic state of being alone.

Due to her inability to easily relate to other townspeople, Lila still finds herself in isolation even after marrying the town’s pastor, John Ames. In the differences that she identified between herself and society, she convinced herself that she does not belong. Though she has companionship, she is viewed as mentally unstable and socially inept, since she spent so much time away from “civilized” society. The time she spent alone during her formative years are evident in her behavior and she is treated as an outcast of society. Lila remains uneducated and not very well mannered and always feels less than those who are around her. She constantly compares herself to them and categorizes herself as “the other.” She doesn’t want to feel less civilized, but she does, especially when she realizes that she doesn’t have a last name, immediately making her feel out of place (Robinson 46). These feelings of alienation often occur when she’s helping people in the town, doing odd jobs for money and directly contrasting her experiences with those of the townspeople. Before marrying John, this tendency to separate herself, by way of identifying how different she is, created a rift in their relationship. Lila automatically self-identified herself as “good” or “bad” for the role she wanted to fill as a productive member of society, but ultimately, she distanced herself further from society in her self-selection.

Through solitude, Lila contemplates what her life really means. As a wanderer who has spent most of her life alone, Lila understands that solitude is an undeniable part of existence and she questions why solitude is necessary to being human. In a world where we sometimes have no control over the things that happen to us, we must prevail through the loneliness and the hurt and the pain. The novel ends with, “Pity [humans], yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild,
more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself in us” (Robinson 261). Humans face suffering, pain, and solitude, but even in all the negative things that we experience, the happiness, joy, and companionship that we find counteracts it all. Though some individuals might let the negative aspects of life overshadow the good, it is important to overcome. Lila’s struggles with solitude allowed her to navigate what her life should mean and determine that extent of her own happiness for which she was responsible. Her realization indicates that through all of the suffering they endure, humans are given passion and desire to overcome them. Lila’s experiences with nature and solitude allow her to transcend the negative things in the world and look forward to what will come.

**The Experience of Solitude and Mental Illness**

As discussed in the literature review, societal isolation as a result of mental instability is not uncommon. In Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood experiences emotional isolation from the world around her due to a diagnosed mental illness. The isolation that she experiences is only exacerbated by the fact that Esther is constantly pushing back against social norms by choosing not to marry, advancing her education, and critiquing the role of women in society (in respect to jobs, sexuality, and domestic role), indicating that she is trying to find her place in society with these contrasting desires. In this way, solitude is used as a way to overcome mental illness by trying to create an identity independent of society. Isolation allows Esther to remove herself from societal expectations but she struggles to place these self-identifying characteristics within the norms of society because they do not align. Her mental illness often isolates her from society and the normal practices of daily living, preventing Esther from continuing to use solitude as a way to create an identity.
Mental illness is isolating not only because it differentiates an individual from the rest of society, but also because it changes the individual’s truths about the world around them. It is nearly impossible for a mentally ill person to find community when there is not a foundation to unite them with the people around them. For example, Esther’s story ends as she is entering a room to be interviewed so that a group of people can determine whether or not she’s mentally stable enough to leave the asylum. But Esther still feels lost and confused under “her bell jar,” which distorts her view of the world around her (Plath 241). She herself does not believe she’s ready to leave. Though she might be able to breathe a little more or she might have her bearings after spending time in a mental institution, she doesn’t know what she really wants for her life or how she’s going to achieve these things.

Both Esther Greenwood and Edna Pontellier struggle with the same questions and ideas as experienced through loneliness and solitude. For these women, solitude became a way for them to question the role of women in marriage (the extent of the domestic role, how their sexual desires should be considered, or not, in their relationship with their husband/significant other, the ideas that society has about women and what they should desire, etc.) and how to live out their true selves. They are both pushed to the periphery of society and isolation for considering these things. Edna commits suicide, as the sea beckons her, and Esther is taken to an asylum (and if Esther represents Sylvia Plath, then she, too, will commit suicide). While mental illness plays a large and significant role *The Bell Jar*, the questions and struggles about womanhood, prompted by solitude, also echo those in *The Awakening*.

**Synthesis**

In all of these American texts, solitude highlights the hard facts of life and reveals truths about characters themselves or the society around them. In some cases, a reflective response
occurs and the path to self-discovery is a little easier to find. In other situations, however, characters deny these truths, triggering consequences that will never allow them to create their own identity independent of the people and expectations that overwhelm them. Solitude, in any form, elicits a response and determines authenticity to self.
Solitude in Latinx literature is represented through alienation and the minority struggle to belong to a society that views Latina/os as “the other.” In the five texts of Latinx literature that I analyze, these characters face solitude in the form of intense acculturation through education and the challenge of creating an identity that balances the two worlds in which they participate. In this context, solitude again becomes an encounter that prompts change, but in contrast to the solitude in dominant American literature, some Latinx characters are prompted to seek out solitude to create an unprecedented identity. This section will examine Latinx characters’ reactions to alienation and the subsequent solitude that they experience, as well as the solitude that is encountered in order to evaluate the American culture that surrounds them.

In Tomas Rivera’s ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him, Richard Rodriguez’s Days of Obligation, and in Sandra Cisneros’ The House on Mango Street, all of the protagonists, the boy, Richard Rodriguez, and Esperanza, seek out solitude as a space for contemplation and creativity. The boy uses the crawl space underneath the house as a space to reflect on his life and the events that have happened to him and his community of migrant workers, Richard Rodriguez uses the writing process as a way to reflect on how his Latinx background has affected his life, and Esperanza uses solitude as a way to explore her identity as a Latina and as a writer. In each case, these characters use solitude as a way to create and discover who they are. This illustrates the positive outcome that solitude can have if utilized effectively.

Solitude in Latinx literature is often manifested through alienation, but as readers see in both Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and Tomas Rivera’s ...And the Earth
Did Not Devour Him, solitude expresses the conflict between communal and individual isolation. In The Brief Life of Oscar Wao, Oscar experiences marginalization, especially after visiting the Dominican Republic, as he refuses “to succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says, You do not belong” (Díaz 276). As mentioned by Oscar, though Latinx immigrants move to the United States in search of a better life (and in the case of Dominican immigrants, an escape from the Trujillo regime), they have willingly chosen to leave their homeland, one that sometimes sees them as traitors to their culture. While Latinx struggle to continue to relate to their homeland, they also struggle to find belonging in an American society that views them as outsiders. In spite of this individual isolation that they experience independent of each other, they are united in their struggle. It is through this unity that they might find their authentic self.

In Tomas Rivera’s ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him, solitude portrays the larger struggle of each individual as they face alienation, but is countered by the possibility to bring a community together through communal isolation. On their individual journeys to find success, a group of migrant workers are united in their preoccupation of the possibility that they might have a hard time making a living. The structure of ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him reflects this vignette as each narrative seems unconnected with the others. However, as Héctor Calderón writes in The Emergence of the Chicano Novel, the seemingly disjointed and fragmented narrative of ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him, echoed in the “consciousness of the narrator, offers explicit instructions to the readers to mirror the character’s sense of memory and discernment by relating the twelve tales and thirteen cuadros one to another and to bind together the many plots into a meaningful whole, un todo;” the structure that Rivera created in ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him itself reinforces the thematic constant of the individual’s relationship
to her or his community despite depicting different stories of Latinx in the United States (Calderón 75). As individuals we are each on our own journey and overcoming our own struggles, yet we all yearn for some type of community. As exemplified through the story of the boy and his experience of solitude, we can identify how each of our stories interact with others in the world around us. The Latinx experience of communal isolation highlights the imminent

**The Latino and Solitude**

Solitude, in the form of alienation, is a result of the pressure of assimilation that young immigrants experience. As families travel and settle in the U.S., these children attend American schools and face intense acculturation. Consequently, they are alienated from their Latinx communities. At the same time, they are also alienated from the American community. Neither community sees them as “fully” Latinx, so they are marginalized and criticized for choosing the other. Each culture expects full loyalty to it and nothing less, so when a Latinx is forced to choose between the two, he/she is faced with an impossible decision. This estrangement causes the character to explore his or her own personal identity so that he/she might self-actualize. This process of education, acculturation, alienation, and later self-discovery is evident in Tomas Rivera’s *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy*, and Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*. In *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, the unnamed main character attends school, but is constantly humiliated. He describes how “everybody just stares at you up and down. And then they make fun of you” (Rivera 93). Though the boy is trying to further his education, he still faces alienation at the hands of American school teachers and administrators. In the end, however, the boy used his and his family’s experiences of alienation to reflect on what it means to be minority in the United States. The boy discovered that we are an intricately connected society and with the power of his
mind, his identity is his own to create. The yearning for community is not unique to only himself; it is through community and a relationship to society that we are able to find our authentic self. In this example, the boy used solitude as a tool and it was effectively used on the journey to self-discovery.

Ernesto, in Ernesto Galarza’s memoir *Barrio Boy*, immigrates as a young boy to the United States with his single mother and uncle in search of a better life, but struggles with balancing the American values he learns through his teachers and the Mexican values that his mother teaches him. Immediately, he sees the world divided into social classes, as it is divided between two kinds of people – “the men on horseback and the men who walked” (Galarza 59). For Ernesto, he was easily able to identify those who were privileged and those who were not. As an only child, he is constantly immersed in the world of adults and he easily observes that the Latinx community is cast out from American society. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity – we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values” (85). Ernesto experiences solitude as a result of the duality of his background, representing the larger conflict of Latinx in America.

Despite an inner conflict, Ernesto used his position as a solitary spectator to determine how he fits in the world as both a Mexican and an American. He echoes Anzaldúa as he remarks on the *pochos*, or Chicanos, that live in the community around them. He says that the “[pochos] considered themselves too good for the barrio but were not, for some reason, good enough for Americans” (Galarza 207). The Latinx living in America are alienated by both cultures that they might fit in too; they are a stateless people, or as Anzaldúa explains, it is “like one cancels out
the other and we are zero, nothing, no one” (85). This leads Ernesto to create an identity that appeases both parts of himself; though he received an American education, he used to it fight for Chicano rights. In this case, the alienation he experienced allowed him to create a perfect balance of identities for himself.

Finally, in Richard Rodriguez’s memoir *Days of Obligation*, readers are given a different perspective on assimilation through education. He outlines the alienation Latinx feel as he writes about his own experiences in grade school saying, “Mexican-Americans forfeit the public experience of America because we fear it” (Rodriguez 63). By not allowing Spanish to be spoken, these teachers prohibit a large part of these Latinx children’s identity and force them to take on an American identity. It is in these situations that the public and private identities of Latinx children are created. This creation of two identities also creates a separation of self and alienates one from the other. In private and in the home, they communicate in Spanish and celebrate their Latinx identity. In response, the Latinx children who have immigrated themselves must try to find a way to blend both of their identities so that each party is satisfied, but this is often difficult to do. Richard Rodriguez used his experiences to pursue an intellectual relationship with history and immerse himself in his public, American self, at the same time rejecting his private self. In his experience with solitude, Richard embraced assimilation and entered fully into American society.

**The Latina and Solitude**

Though the Latinx community faces solitude and alienation as a whole, the strength of Latinas is highlighted in the solitude that is endured as a result of the loss of a loved one. In Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and in Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, women characters face their own types of solitude and overcome it. In *The Brief
*Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, La Inca’s self-sufficiency and tenacity is the foundation of Oscar’s existence. Though “she was lost in the wilderness of her grief” (Díaz 254) after her husband died, she went to go find the orphaned Beli, who was living in the slums of the Dominican Republic. After isolating herself from her family, she realized that “dead husband or no dead husband, mourning or no mourning, she had failed utterly in her responsibility to her cousin” (Díaz 254). La Inca used this solitude to evaluate her situation. The isolation that she experienced prompted her to dedicate herself the betterment of Beli, eventually leading to the birth of Oscar. After her solitary time, she was able to come back to life and become a successful Latina, opening bakeries to provide for herself and for Beli.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza’s grandmother’s wild and rebellious spirit is a characteristic that Esperanza admires and she uses it as inspiration to overcome her own challenges. Despite being taken from her family to become a housewife, Esperanza’s grandmother refused to become submissive. She instead spends her days looking out of a window, “the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (Cisneros 11). Esperanza is more proactive than her grandmother could be about her life and declares “her point-of-view about her own future, and makes it clear that she would never accept this heritage passed on by so many women before her, who had to passively watch their lives pass them by and perform the tasks that were expected of them, on account of being Chicano women” (Grum 43). Esperanza was able to observe and evaluate the lives of the women around her and through *The House on Mango Street* was able to determine the identity that she wanted for herself. In the face of her dad’s *machismo* and the pre-determined standards that Latinx society has set for women, she channeled her creative solitude to create herself. Solitude served as a way for Esperanza to find the will and courage to survive.
The Duality of Identity and Solitude

Solitude also prompts the children of immigrants to create a dual-identity for themselves. As children, they are automatically entered into American society, but at the same time, they are often given the same national pride their parents have. Though they know no different than the American society they live in, they are still forced to create a dual-identity based on their mainly American experiences and their conflicting traditional Latinx background, beliefs, and values. In Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, the main character, Esperanza, struggles with this integration of cultures. She, as an empowered young woman, is in constant conflict with her traditional, *macho* father. She turns to writing and seeks out solitude to explore and create her identity as a Chicana. She recognizes that men and women live in different, unequal worlds, but Esperanza refuses to inherit the traditional subservient role that women in her family have held (Cisneros 8, 11). On her aunt’s advice, Esperanza uses writing as a way to set herself free (Cisneros 61). The creative solitude that Esperanza sought helped her to develop her own unique identity.

Oscar, in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, feels like he does not belong to either the American or Dominican-American community; he struggles to fit the Dominican male stereotype and identifies more with the typical American nerd. As a Dominican male, the societal expectation is that he will take advantage of the women around him, but as a nerd, Oscar spends a lot of time alone, reading and writing his own science fiction manuscripts. Though he attempts to fill this lonely void through creative solitude, he is unable to find contentment. It was only after a reconnection with his Dominican heritage that he was able to fulfill his potential. His acquisition self-discovery was developed with the perfect mixture of his American and
Dominican identities. Because he was so nerdy, he was cast out and labeled a loser, but after reconnecting with his Dominican ancestry, his creative writing allowed him to explore the magical folklores of his family, not only the American tradition of comic books. Through this unique integration of his ethnic background and love of American storytelling, he was able to create a dual identity.

**Synthesis**

Solitude in Latinx literature represents the larger struggle of fitting into a society that is unwelcoming. Through solitude, Latinx characters are able to turn their experiences into lessons and to create an identity that balances the duality of their experience living in the United States. Many times, the alienation they face is a result of the intense acculturation through education that young Latinx people face, but the responsibility to find a balance between two cultures remains with the characters. In other cases, solitude can be actively and intentionally sought out, often by the children of immigrants, to learn as both American and Latinx. Solitude in Latinx literature is a catalyst for change and is successful in helping characters achieve self-discovery.
SECTION IV
SYNTHESIS

Solitude is represented in literature based on real life experiences of loneliness, isolation, and/or alienation; each of these struggles prompts characters to make changes in their lives. In this way solitude not only becomes a medium in which we can analyze the world around us, but also a tool to aid us in self-discovery. Therefore, it is through solitude that we become our authentic selves. This can be attributed to the continual pursuit of the authentic self and the universal ethnic experience of solitude. Readers are able to learn lessons about the experience of solitude through literature and apply it to their daily lives. More than this, solitude elicits different responses from different characters. In the end, each outcome is based on the initial confrontation of solitude and the subsequent events that take place.

To return to Octavio Paz insight that “Self discovery is above all the realization that we are alone” (Paz 9), the experience of solitude and self-discovery inextricably connected. This should not be surprising; the pursuit of the authentic self transcends generations and cultures and its relation to solitude is not exclusive. In Tomas Rivera’s ...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him and Marilynne Robinson’s Lila, readers are able to witness how two characters, the boy and Lila, live on the edge of society as characters who are displaced in some way as physically isolated individuals. Through their experiences, both characters use their forced solitude to evaluate the world around them. Their experiences give them the advantage of being able to reach a higher level of understanding than those around them. Readers see the contrast between the main and supporting characters. The use of solitude as a tool for discovery aids Lila and the boy in creating
their authentic selves as compared to the inability of their peers to do the same. Not only this, but Lila and the boy are also able to attain happiness and satisfaction while those around them do not. Readers are able to observe not only an authentic self, but also the consequences of never reaching this level of self-understanding.

Solitude exposes the different ways that people cope with their circumstances. This study illustrates the two main ways of confronting solitude. The first is the character’s response to his/her personal solitude and to avoid it and refuse to face its meaning and significance; the second is to fully embrace and confront it. In both cases, the representation of solitude reminds us of our innate humanness. The different approaches taken in response to the experience of solitude determine each character’s fate. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*, and William Faulkner’s *Light in August* each character desperately yearned for a community, but this search only furthered them from a deeper connection with the people around them. Edna Pontellier, Harry Morgan, and Joe Christmas, when faced with solitude, tried to find belonging in the society around them, but were unable to do so. In addition to solitude, Edna faced societal gender expectations, Harry faced the inability to provide for his family, and Joe faced intolerance of minorities. In response to this experience of loneliness, isolation, and/or alienation, they all took the same response: to avoid it and find fulfillment in other things. In the end, their avoidance of solitude prevented them from exploring their authentic selves and creating identities in relation to the society in which they lived.

On the other hand, in Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy*, Marilynne Robinson’s *Lila*, and Tomas Rivera’s *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, each character is able to confront the solitude that they face and use it as a way to reach self-discovery. Specifically, in
the cases of Oscar Wao, Esperanza, and the boy in *and the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, they were able to find an identity in the solitude that they sought out. Though they all faced different challenges, each character yearned for a community and found it through their community-centered perspective on life. All of these characters, except Lila (who despite being a nomadic character, valued community especially while traveling for companionship, if not only for protection), all come from Latinx backgrounds that have strong familial values. In the end, the community surrounding each character, be it a familial, ethnic, or religious, community proved necessary to counteract the solitude that they experienced. Though they might have found it difficult to find a community in the society they lived in at first, in the face of solitude they found their place within their community and was later able to live harmoniously with the world around them.

In addition to these two main responses, there is the role that mental illness plays in creating and maintaining a solitary world for those who are mentally ill. As seen in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, the experience of solitude for Esther did not support depression or similar illnesses. Instead, it only furthered her isolation and created more feelings of alienation. In addition to this, the alienation and isolation that Esther experienced was only exacerbated by her gender, one that society has specific expectations for. While Esther did not have control over the effects of her mental illness, the experience of solitude influenced her reactions to the people around her.

I believe the main difference between the characters who faced solitude and were later able to reach self-discovery and those who were not is this community centered mindset. Living in a community highlights the differences between ourselves and others; if we choose to avoid the solitude that we face, then our differences only become more obvious as seen in the stories of
Edna, Harry Morgan, and Joe Christmas. If, however, in the solitude that we experience, we are able to reconcile our differences with society and find our authentic selves in relation to society, then we might find community, rather than difference, with those around us. We see these stories in Oscar, Esperanza, Ernesto, Lila, and the boy, who all find their identity through the solitude that they faced. In their community, they were able to reconcile their differences in the solitude that they faced.

Solitude in literature pushes characters in their journeys to self-discovery. Through the experience of solitude, they are prompted into action. It is evident that these experiences, manifested in loneliness, isolation, or alienation, greatly impacts characters’ development. As humans we also must choose our actions carefully. This study illustrates solitude’s universal elements and that it is an enduring experience. More than this, it is not discriminatory because affects all cultures and people. In understanding our personal experiences of solitude, we might be better able to relate with our neighbors of other cultures. The struggle of solitude is an enduring one; it is a representation of our differences with society colliding. It is up to the individual to resolve these issues and find communion with their authentic self, as well as with others.
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