

Growing Through Pain: The Significance of Ethnic and Sexual Identity in Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

My presentation will explore the impact of the protagonist's identity as a gay child of immigrants on his journey of self-actualization in the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. I will show how external stereotypes relating to Aristotle's Latino background and the internal struggles stemming from his sexuality contribute to his expanding personal universe.

In my discussion of stereotypes, I will focus on the toxic masculinity prevalent in the 1980s in El Paso, Texas. Aristotle feels immense pressure to suppress his emotions and internalize his struggles like his father who also remains emotionally distant. As the only son in a Mexican family, Ari carries the weight of familial expectations, which intensify his sense of isolation. The presentation will then also examine his Latino identity, using passages from the novel to highlight moments when Ari and Dante unravel their thoughts about feeling "less Mexican." These moments not only reflect their insecurities but also challenge the cultural stereotypes imposed on them and their sense of belonging.

Beyond the external stereotypes, Ari's internal problems are equally as important and guide him on his path to self-actualization. A focus in the presentation will be placed on the LGBTQIA+ experience through Ari's feelings of internalized homophobia, fear of rejection, and slow self-actualization. His hesitancy and the fear of not fitting in hold him back from expressing and accepting his love for his friend Dante. Conversely, Dante and his family act as a foil in representing how expressive and loving relationships can be possible between parents and children.

In the presentation, I will unpack how homophobia and stereotypes influence Ari's personal development and his moral compass. In closing, I will invite the audience to reflect on the extent to which the novel would be different if the protagonist were a white heterosexual teenage boy.

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Biography: Nora Kadiatou Diarrassouba is from Germany and has roots in the Ivory Coast and South Korea. Currently a junior in high school, she serves as President of the NEHS chapter at the International School of Kigali in Rwanda. Passionate about promoting literacy, Nora has been involved in a documentary project for NEHS, highlighting the transformative power of literature on individuals and communities. Alongside fellow NEHS member Aya Desie, they successfully led their first buddy reading event, aiming to spread literacy and better community relationships. In her free time, Nora loves to write poetry and short stories, exploring the beauty of language for her project *I Am Not Your Headline*, which empowers individuals and communities through storytelling and art.

