A Loss Of Language Essay, Research Paper

A Loss of Language

In Richard Rodriguez?s ?Gains and Losses,? we are told the story of how he learned English as a young boy, and, in turn, stopped using his family?s language, Spanish. The story is the portrayal of a Latino family that does not speak English very well and are pushed, by American society?s cultural expectations, to learn the language and essentially drop their native tongue. The family did have a choice in the matter however, but the alternative was to remain outcasts of the society in which they lived. They also stopped using Spanish on their own accord in order to assimilate and become what was considered American. The story tells us how Rodriguez feels about and deals with his family?s assimilation. He also explains how he feels about each of the languages and using them, as well as the changes that take place in his family. Using these feeling and actions, the author shows us how American society encourages immigrants to accept its culture and become part of it.

In ?Gains and Losses,? Rodriguez explains how he views the English and Spanish languages as two totally different things. He refers to the two as incongruent and when the teachers come into his home and speak English, it is ?a clash of two worlds? (50). In this, he shows us that he doesn?t feel that the two can coexist, that there is a choice, one or the other. He also refers to Spanish as a ?private? language and English as a ?public? language. In doing this he implies that he feels comfortable speaking Spanish and it is more personal for him. It has more meaning. English, for him, is just a language for communicating not an expression of feelings. He doesn?t want to use English in his home, he ?doesn?t believe that [he can] speak a single public language? (49). This tells us that he doesn?t think that he can just use English all the time and still have the same feelings in his words but he is forced to do so by the school and his parents.

Rodriguez learns the new language and it becomes his primary language both at home and in public but reflects on how he misses the closeness of Spanish and what it did for his family. After the use of Spanish is almost totally wiped out in their house he explains that his family was ?no longer bound tight by the pleasing and troubling knowledge of [their] public separateness? (51). He felt that being outcastes of society kept his family close and what made them outcastes was their use of the Spanish language. Later in the story, as he hears people on the street speaking Spanish, it reminds him of how much he misses it and refers to the times when he did speak it as ?the golden age of [his] youth? (53). He liked his family to be close and that was the nature of their culture but in learning English this closeness was lost only to be a memory to look back on. He also doesn?t know what to call his parents anymore because what he used to call them seems improper and reminds him too much of his more comfortable language.

We also see great change in Rodriguez?s family throughout the story, in both the way they feel about English and how they deal with not using Spanish anymore. He tells us that as they used more and more English the family spoke less and less. He is saying that this assimilation broke down his family and their interaction. As Rodriguez learns English he no longer feels of himself as an outcaste too. He feels comfortable in public, that in learning the language he became part of society and with that came the feeling that he belonged. He also talks about his father and how he ?seemed reconciled to a new quiet? (52) because he is not confident in his English. The fact that the rest of the family uses English well and that his father is not quite as good makes him an outcaste of the family. This is just another way in which Rodriguez?s family and their ways are changed by American society.

In the end, the author comes ?to realize what had been technically true since [his] birth: [he] was an American citizen? (51). This explains that American society and its cultural expectations of him and his family did not let him feel as though he was a part of it until he learned the language. In this story we are shown how these cultural expectations forced Rodriguez and his family to lose some of their own culture and identity. In order to be accepted and feel like a part of the whole the family had to sacrifice their native language, that he felt held them together, and accept a new way of speaking. Although Rodriguez does not tell us about how he as a person in society changed much except that he was accepted by the other children, it is very probable that to fit into society?s ever changing mold he had to change some of his mannerisms and ways as well as his language. Through this story he shows us how pressure and the expectations of society can do this to a person and his family.