When the Emperor was Divine

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JULIE OTSUKA

Julie Otsuka was born and raised in California. She studied art as an undergraduate at Yale University, and pursued a career as a painter for several years before turning to fiction writing at the age of thirty. She received her MFA in fiction at Columbia University in 1999. Her first novel, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, is based on Otsuka's own family history. The FBI arrested her grandfather, a suspected spy for Japan, the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed (1941), and her mother, uncle, and grandmother spent three years at the Topaz internment camp. Nearly ten years after the publication of her first novel, Otsuka published *The Buddha in the Attic*, which is about a group of young Japanese women who sailed to America in the early 1900s to become the wives of men they have never met. Otsuka currently lives in New York City and spends almost every afternoon writing and reading at her neighborhood café.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel details one family's experience of Japanese-American internment. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii by the Japanese Air Force on December 7, 1941 marked the beginning of America's involvement in World War II. In the months after this attack, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the forced evacuation and incarceration of all people of Japanese ancestry living in the United States. The government feared that Japanese-Americans might ally themselves with Japan and engage in sabotage and espionage against the United States. Though the government never produced any evidence to suggest that this was an actual possibility, over 100,000 Japanese civilians and resident aliens were deported to internment camps. From spring 1942 to the end of the war in the summer of 1944, people were forced to live in these designated camps as if they were prisoners of war. In 1980, Congress condemned internment as unjust and motivated by racism and xenophobic ideas rather than by actual military necessity. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush issued a formal apology where he stated, "No nation can fully understand itself or find its place in the world if it does not look with clear eyes at all the glories and disgraces of its past. We in the United States acknowledge such an injustice in our history. The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry was a great injustice, and it will never be repeated."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Since the novel is a work of historical fiction, in writing it Otsuka immersed herself in mostly nonfiction histories and personal memoirs that described the events of Japanese-American interment. She read oral history collections, secondary sources on the detainees' experiences, and old newspapers from the 1940s so that she could know as many details as possible. Some of these secondary sources include *The Great Betrayal: The Evacuation of the Japanese-Americans During World War II* by Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis, and *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American Family* by Yoshiko Uchida. With regard to the literary style of the novel, Otsuka has identified the direct, visual style of Ernest Hemingway and Cormac McCarthy as influences for her writing. Thematically, Otsuka's novel draws from the themes of war, dislocation, and exile present in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Otsuka might also have in mind Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and its dark, spare, and almost apocalyptic writing about the American West.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *When the Emperor was Divine*
- **When Written:** 1995-2002
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Historical Fiction
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Berkeley, California and a Japanese-American internment camp in Topaz, Utah, during and after World War II
- **Climax:** When the family meets the character of the father at the train station
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient, first-person plural, and free indirect discourse

EXTRA CREDIT

The Hallelujah Guy: Otsuka makes reference to man at the internment camp who would shout, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" Otsuka based this character on an actual neighborhood figure in the Morningside Heights area of New York.

A Painterly Process: Many critics of the novel have suggested that the book's precise visual imagery is a result of Otsuka's background as a painter, and Otsuka herself has suggested that this background also has a larger effect on her work ethic. As a painter, she went to the studio every day, methodically making small changes to her overall painting. She says she applies this same discipline to writing now.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a spring day in 1942 in Berkeley, California, the unnamed character of the woman reads a sign, Evacuation Order No. 19, in the post office. The sign says that all people of Japanese ancestry living in the city will be evacuated in the next couple of weeks. The woman returns home to pack and to get her two preadolescent children—known as the girl and the boy—ready to evacuate. Last December, the woman's husband was detained by the U.S. government under suspicion of being an "alien enemy." On the night before the evacuation, when her children are in bed, the woman sits on the floor of her kitchen and cries at the thought of leaving with no idea if she will ever come back.

The woman, girl, and boy travel through Nevada on a train to a relocation camp in Utah. The train is full of people of Japanese ancestry and the armed guards who accompany them. The train passes through a town, and everyone must close their shades—the last time they passed a town with their shades up, someone threw a rock through the window. A few hours after she falls a sleep, the girl wakes up to see out the window a group of **wild mustangs** galloping across the desert. She wakes her brother and pushes his face gently to the glass. In a soft moan, he says, "They're going away." The next morning, soldiers with bayonets escort the family off the train and into a camp called Topaz, where hundreds of tar-paper barracks are lined up in a dried up salt lake. The camp is surrounded by barbed-wire fences.

At the beginning of the internment, the boy thinks he sees his father in the faces of all of the other adult male prisoners. To him, they all look alike. He remembers how the day after the FBI took his father away, his mother burned all their relics from Japan: the letters from family, the Japanese flag, and the records of Japanese opera.

In the winter, the boy asks the girl where their captors get the meat they're eating. The girl says the army rounds up the wild horses and shoots them. The girl starts going through a rebellious phase, spending less time with her family, eating her meals with the other girls, and smoking cigarettes. Meanwhile her mother spends all her days inside, staring at the stove or sleeping.

In April, a man is shot near the fences for supposedly trying to escape, but the prisoners claim he was only reaching out to pluck a flower. Often at night, the boy imagines sitting next to his father and telling him everything that he has missed out on.

When the family is finally released and returns home, they find their house in disrepair. The **rosebush** out front has been uprooted. Broken bottles, soiled mattresses, and empty food cans litter the floor, and someone wrote a racist slur in the bedroom. On the first night back, they sleep together in a room that looks almost like the one in the barracks. In class, the children behave very well so that no one will mistake them for the enemy ever again. Their mother looks for work, but few people will hire her since she is Japanese. She eventually finds a job as a maid. One day, a telegram arrives saying that the father will arrive home soon. When they meet him at the train station, he is a toothless, bald old man. The kids don't recognize him, even when he gets on his knees and hugs them, uttering their names. At home, he is either silent or flying into rages over the smallest things. He spends most of his days in his room, scribbling in his journal. In May, when the roses burst into bloom, the children wander the streets looking for their mother's rosebush. They cannot find it, but imagine that in some stranger's backyard, the rosebush is blossoming wildly.

In the final chapter, written like a journal entry, the man tells his story. He sarcastically says that everything is true: he engaged in sabotage and spied on his neighbors. He says that Japanese traitors are all around: the priest, the reverend, the shoeshine boy, and more. He says that his crime was being too short, too dark of skin, too proud. The novel ends with him apologizing for these "crimes" before writing, "There. That's it. I've said. Now can I go?"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Woman – The woman—who, like the other main characters, is never named—begins the novel as an upper middle-class Japanese-American housewife living in California. She is quiet, confident, and graceful, and keeps her inner emotional life to herself. Caring deeply about her absent husband and two children, she alone shoulders the burden of preparing the children to evacuate during the Japanese American internment, performing the necessary actions with methodical determination and a bit of resignation to her fate. At the internment camp, she loses this emotional strength and clear-sighted practicality as she psychologically disconnects from her children and the world around her, spending most days asleep and dreaming of her childhood in Japan. After returning home, she regains her composure and her pragmatism, eventually becoming a maid for wealthy white families so that she can provide for her family.

The Girl – At the cusp of adolescence, the girl is inquisitive, friendly, and has a strong American identity: she wears Mary Jane shoes, listens to Dorothy Lamour, and loves American candy. Because she has internalized white American beauty standards, she often looks in the mirror and fears that she is a plain-looking girl. At the internment camp, she goes through the familiar rebellious stages of becoming a teenager. She pulls away from her younger brother and mother—the boy and the woman, respectively—as she spends more time with friends and experiments with testing social boundaries by smoking

cigarettes and staying out past curfew. When she returns from the camp, she loses this rebellious streak and becomes obedient, afraid of once again being mistaken for the enemy and being sent back to the camps.

The Boy – The woman's younger child, the boy is seven when the novel starts. A dreamy child, he has a strong imagination and a deep connection to the natural world. Sensitive, intuitive, and compassionate, the boy deeply misses his father and tries to care for his mother as she struggles to stay grounded in reality at the internment camp. While the girl rebels against the family structure, the boy is more resistant to the oppressive life of the camp. While he too shows all the signs of being a well-assimilated American boy, he also asserts his identity as Japanese through small acts of resistance, like muttering the name of the **Emperor** under his breath. Like the girl, the boy stops resisting oppression when he returns home, as he is afraid of being sent back to the camps.

The Man / The Father – For most of the novel, the father only exists in the memories of the other family members and in the short, censored letters he writes from the detention camp (he was detained by the U.S. government months before the story begins). The family remembers him as a loving, mild-mannered, and gentle man, and his warm letters, though censored, confirm that he loves and cares for his family. However, when we see the man at the end of the novel, he is a bitter and weary, reeling from the psychological effects of being unjustly interned as an "alien enemy." Gripped by his rage and resentment at America for imprisoning him and his family, the man slowly disconnects from the family, becoming more sullen and withdrawing into his inner world. Though he did not physically die at the camp, he does return as a ghost of his former self.

Joe Lundy – The white owner of the general store in Berkeley that the woman visits. Sympathetic to the woman's forced relocation, he offers her candy for her children while at the same time scrubbing a **stain** from the cash register. Joe appears to be a stand-in for all white Americans who disagreed with the evacuation but did nothing to stop it, and thus are still symbolically "stained" by the terrible American tragedy that was Japanese-American internment.

Emperor Hirohito – The Japanese **Emperor** during the war. According to Japanese traditions, the Emperor was the divine embodiment of a god. The boy repeats his name over and over as an act of defiance against the prison guards. At the end of the war, the Emperor repudiates his divinity, signaling the end of a period of Japanese pride and self-determination.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Ueno – The woman's former maid who takes on her old deferential role in the camp by helping the woman carry a bucket of water to her barracks. The maid represents how differences in class still exits even inside the internment camp.

Teizo "Ted" Ishimoto – An older gentleman whom the girl meets on the train, Ted was a rich man until he lost all his money due to racist discrimination and relocation.

Jean-François Millet – The 19th century French painter of *The Gleaners*. This painting of peasants is hanging in the woman's house.

Dorothy Lamour – A popular actress and big band singer from the 1930s and 40s. She is one of the girl's favorite entertainers.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM

Beginning in February, 1942, the United States government sent over 100,000 Japanese-Americans to internment camps for the duration of World War II. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government feared that Japanese-American citizens would ally themselves to Japan and engage in acts of sabotage and espionage against America. In the 1980s, however, a congressional commission reviewed the situation and found little evidence of Japanese-Americans having expressed any disloyalty to the United States. The committee concluded that internment was a product of racism against Asian-Americans rather than of a legitimate concern about national security.

In its recounting of one family's experience of internment, Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* explores the various racist stereotypes surrounding Asian identity that contributed to the unjust incarceration of so many people. On one level, Otsuka demonstrates how the fear of Japanese-American disloyalty stems from the racist tendency to lump all Asian people together as the same. For the U.S. government, there was no difference between the Japanese air force pilot bombing Pearl Harbor and the Japanese American citizen filling a prescription at the local pharmacy. Both were labeled as enemy aliens: foreign, different, and dangerous. It was this belief that Japanese-Americans were perpetual foreigners—never fully able to assimilate into American culture—that led to the fear of their disloyalty to the American government.

Otsuka illustrates the prevalence of these beliefs at the time by showing how even the unnamed character of the boy has internalized the same racist beliefs as white Americans. Since the boy has lived his entire life in America, he is so assimilated into American culture that he adopts the prevalent racist beliefs about Japanese people. When he first arrives at the

internment camp, he uses racially-insensitive terms to describe how all the Japanese men look the same. Indoctrinated in the American belief system, he holds the same stereotypes as the average American who fears that Japanese-Americans are no different than enemy Japanese soldiers.

Even the main characters' namelessness embodies how racism eradicates individuality. Racism works by applying a stereotype or judgment to an entire group of people, erasing the individual identities of the people in the group. The lack of names, therefore, represents how racism can make individuals appear like the same nameless members of a minority group—a demonized "other."

THE MODEL MINORITY

The term "model minority" refers to minority groups that have supposedly achieved high levels of socioeconomic success in America. The term initially was used to describe Japanese-Americans, but has since extended to include people from Jewish, East Asian, and South Asian communities as well.

In this novel, Otsuka suggests that the experience of internment acted as a sort of cultural trauma in the minds of Japanese-Americans, causing them to react by seeking conventional forms of success in the United States. For example, as a result of their traumatic experiences in the camp, the boy and girl decide to be obedient and work extra hard so that they will never be mistaken for "the enemy" again. The children hope that by conforming to conventional American definitions of success, they will appear as upstanding citizens and thus be safer from future discrimination.

This fear of returning to the camp essentially forces the children to construct a new, psychological kind of prison for themselves. To be part of the model minority, the children have to repress emotions like anger and frustration—anything that might be seen as negative and used as an excuse for discrimination. They even have to accept the racism and intolerance of their white American peers without complaint, so as not to appear that they want to change the racial status-quo. To conform to the ideal of the model minority, the children have to restrict their behaviors, feelings, and desires. In the end, however, they have simply moved from a physical prison to a prison of the mind.

IMPRISONMENT AND FREEDOM

While reading *When the Emperor was Divine*, some readers might ask themselves why Japanese-Americans did not resist their own unlawful incarceration. The novel answers this question in the opening scene, when the woman obligingly follows the evacuation order displayed in the post office window. For the woman, being a good citizen entails following the nation's laws. Having lived as a law-abiding citizen her entire life, she does not need a police officer or a soldier to force her to evacuate because she has already internalized the value of obeying the law. The novel therefore suggests that people quickly learn to normalize the laws of their society, even when these laws are unjust towards the very people defending and obeying them.

As the novel progresses, Otsuka provides numerous examples of how people come to consent to their own imprisonment. The boy blames himself rather than the government for getting his family sent to the camp. The prisoners tell themselves they prefer the camp over the outside world of racism and discrimination, and no one even complains about or questions their internment itself. Instead of struggling against the injustice through acts of resistance, most people simply accept their imprisonment because they feel as if they have no other choice.

Even after the family's literal imprisonment is over, the family cannot escape the psychological affects of their traumatic experience—essentially a mental prison that is much harder to escape. On the first night home, the family sleeps in the same arrangement as they did in the camp. In this way, they turn their own home into a reflection of the camp—like the family's **pet bird**, they have gotten used to their cage, and find it difficult to give up what is familiar. On a deeper level, the characters *want* to forget their time in the camp, but the past won't let them go. By the end of the novel, they become prisoners of their own memories, unable to move on from the experience. As mentioned in the previous theme, the children also try to conform to the ideal of the "model minority" and, as a result, construct new psychological restrictions for themselves.

Freedom, though never truly attained, is always a possibility just beyond the characters' reach, an ideal for which they yearn. In one of the final scenes of the novel, the **rosebush** represents that ideal of freedom. Unlike the family, the rosebush is "blossoming madly, wildly, pressing one perfect red flower after another out into the late afternoon light." The rosebush's wild growth is its freedom, representing people's potential when they are not constricted by oppressive laws or discrimination. The novel concludes with this image of wild freedom, a freedom the characters long for despite the various prisons that confine them.

SOCIAL CLASS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The novel opens with the family having achieved the economic prosperity and success associated with the "American dream." Wealthy enough not to have to work, the woman's life is full of traditional American signs of prosperity and class. She owns her house in the suburbs, wears white gloves, and hires a maid to clean her house. For all intents and purposes, she has achieved the American dream of a

secure, middle-class lifestyle.

It quickly becomes clear, however, that the woman's class status and wealth cannot protect her or her family from racism and internment. As soon as the U.S. government turns on its Japanese-American citizens, the woman's wealth and perceived security all disappear. Overnight, the government freezes her bank accounts and takes away the family's civil liberties. This sudden and staggering injustice, especially compared to the family's previous status in America, suggests that the "American dream" might only be a fantasy for minority groups. Because they don't have the security of being a part of the dominant white majority, Asian-Americans and other minorities can easily be turned against and demonized as "other" or not "real" Americans.

Interestingly, at the internment camp class divisions within the Japanese-American community become more blurred. Businessmen become janitors and the wealthy have no access to their money, so there is no real way to back up any elite status they might want to maintain. In this way, institutional racism paradoxically equalizes the Japanese-American community by uniting everyone under the same shared struggle. There are still exceptions to this, however: even after the woman loses her wealth, her former maid—who is also interned at the camp—continues her social role as lower-class "help" when she helps carry the woman's bucket of water to the barracks. This small interaction suggests that class divisions do not ever fully disappear, even when a community shares a common race, ethnicity, and living situation, and is also struggling against a single mutual oppressor.

When the family returns home after the war, the woman begins anew her pursuit of the American dream. With few job opportunities for Japanese-Americans after the war, the woman takes a job as a domestic worker in order to provide for her children. Having achieved the "dream" and then having had it snatched away from her, she is forced to begin again from the bottom. The novel ultimately suggests that for people of color, the American dream is something of a mirage, or perhaps a nightmare.

ASSIMILATION AND LOSS OF IDENTITY

Typically, assimilation refers to a group of people with their own heritage, traditions, and values adopting the culture of another group. But rather than the mingling of two cultural identities, *When the Emperor was Divine* depicts Japanese-American assimilation as more like the gradual *loss* of one's identity altogether.

Before the war, the family's home was full of the markers of their assimilated, Westernized life (a grand piano, a framed picture of a classic Western artwork, a baseball glove) and also of their Japanese heritage (a bonsai tree, pictures of a family member in Japanese military regalia, a Japanese flag). Containing a multiplicity of cultural objects, their home illustrates the possibility of the coexistence of Japanese and American cultural identities. In this home, the characters do not need to sacrifice one side of their identity in order to conform to the other.

This coexistence does not last, however. As soon as the government detains her husband under suspicion of being a spy, the woman destroys all the cultural links to Japan in their home. The war with Japan causes the family to give up their Japanese heritage in order to demonstrate their sole loyalty to the American side of their identities. As a result, assimilation causes them to eradicate a crucial part of their selves—and even this doesn't save them from internment.

This loss of identity also occurs on a more personal level. Internment causes the woman to become a shell of her former self—she either spends hours in total silence or sleeps away her days. In the camp, she loses the strength that marked her personality in the first chapter. The children are more resilient, holding onto their identities for longer, although they too eventually succumb. The girl, who never showed much of a connection to Japanese cultural identity, holds onto her assimilated American identity. She appears to go through the normal stages of growing up: distancing herself from her family, spending more time with friends, and testing social boundaries. In contrast, the boy tries to keep his Japanese heritage. At one point, the boy mutters the name of the **Emperor** under his breath when passing the guard tower as an act of personal resistance against giving up his Japanese identity.

But after the war, the children, like their mother, begin to lose their cultural identities and even their unique personalities. For fear of returning to the camps, the children conform completely to assimilated norms. They follow all the rules and avoid sticking out. Otsuka formally illustrates this conformity and lack of identity by writing the second to last chapter through the shared perspective of both children. Though the boy and girl were previously very distinct characters, Otsuka writes this chapter with the pronoun "we" to show that the two children have become essentially interchangeable, a unit of two personalities that are no different from one another. Internment and this fearful kind of assimilation, therefore, rob them of everything that made them complex and nuanced human beings.

The novel concludes with the father, who likewise loses his original identity. After his detainment he is no longer kind and easygoing as he was before—he becomes an angry man who slips deeper and deeper into his interior world, eventually barely speaking to his family. By the end of the novel, he is a ghost of his former self, an empty void in the family. The novel thus illustrates how the horrors of institutionalized racism and oppression can cause a complete loss of identity, as being dehumanized by others for so long eventually makes one dehumanize one's own self.

INSCRUTABILITY AND THE UNKNOWN

At one point in the novel, the boy refers to all the Japanese-American people in the camp as "inscrutable," which means that they are impossible to know. This "inscrutability" was the exact reason why the U.S. government locked up innocent Japanese-American citizens. Since the government could never know for sure the loyalties of these citizens, the government decided to just incarcerate them all.

Otsuka explores this idea of inscrutability in a number of ways in the novel. The family members' lack of names—they are "the woman," "the boy" "the girl" and "the man"—provides the most obvious example. Since Otsuka cannot write about every single Japanese person who went through internment, the family's namelessness makes them more symbolic, as if the family is a stand-in for the thousands of Japanese-Americans who went through similar experiences during the war. But their lack of names also represents how racism erases people's individuality. As mentioned in the themes of racism and assimilation, stereotypes make all the individuals in a group seem interchangeable, as if they were all the same. Finally, the family's namelessness could represent the fundamental inscrutability of identity. Names and the act of naming allow us to identify and know the different elements that make up our world. Naming something is almost like possessing it in a way—it becomes more familiar, less unknown. The family member's lack of names thus preserves their inscrutability, and in a way makes them seem more alive.

This namelessness and the inscrutability it suggests ultimately show that Otsuka wants the reader to become comfortable with the unknown. From the man's censored letters and his untold experiences at the camps to the mysteriousness of the woman, so much in this novel is left in the shadows. With all these unknown elements, Otsuka seems to gesture towards the fundamental inscrutability of others—of *all* others, regardless of race or nationality. We can never truly comprehend the true feelings or experiences of other people, no matter how similar or close to them we are.

But instead of fearing this unknown, Otsuka suggests that we should accept it as an essential part of our reality. Fear of the unknown is essentially what caused the unjust incarceration of thousands of innocent Japanese-American civilians, and this same fear has caused untold tragedies throughout history—it motivated the Nazis to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe, and causes people today to denounce all Muslims or Arabs as terrorists. In contrast to this fear that leads to violence and persecution, Otsuka suggests we should empathize with the unknown, accept it, and recognize the fundamental inscrutability of existence—something common to all of us.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

STAINS

Stains are the presiding symbolic image throughout the first chapter of the novel. The first stain appears on Joe Lundy's cash register. As Lundy and the woman talk indirectly about the imminent evacuation, he tries, in vain, to wipe away the stain. Here, the stain represents the forced evacuation of Japanese-Americans. As one of the United States' greatest shames, the national relocation of Japanese-Americans will forever mar, or *stain*, American history. In this scene, Lundy's friendliness to the woman suggests that he harbors no ill will towards her, but his vain attempt to erase the stain shows that all white Americans are complicit in this injustice, even those who disagree with the evacuations but do nothing to stop it. Later in the chapter, a bloodstain appears on the woman's gloves when she kills **White Dog**. Though the woman kills White Dog out of mercy, so that it won't starve when the family is gone, Otsuka suggests that even this action will have lasting psychological effects on the woman. The stain imagery implies that all violence leaves echoes and traces that affect us into the future. From the cash register that Joe Lundy just cannot get clean to the woman's white gloves soiled by her dog's blood, stains represent the enduring presence of past violence and transgressions.

WILD AND DOMESTICATED ANIMALS

In a novel deeply concerned with what it means to be free, animals represent the various forms of incarceration. The first animal we see is White Dog, a completely domesticated animal that relies completely on the family for sustenance. White Dog trusts the woman, his provider, so much that he offers no resistance when she kills him out of mercy. Here, White Dog represents many of the Japanese-Americans themselves, who trust the U.S. government so much that they consent to the injustice of being sent to the internment camps.

Unlike White Dog, the family's caged bird *does* escape its imprisonment. It is the family's domesticated pet, but the woman decides to releases the bird from its cage instead of killing it, because she knows it can survive in the wild. When she first lets it out, however, the bird refuses to be free, tapping on the windows to be let back in. Here, we see the psychological power of incarceration, and the feeling of safety and security that can come with imprisonment. The bird has internalized its status as a prisoner and does not want to give it up—the cage is comforting and familiar to it.

Finally, the wild mustangs that the children see on the desert plain represent complete liberty. Running across the plain, the wild animals revel in their freedom. Looking out the window, the boy admires and longs for that freedom as his family hurdles toward the prison camp. For the boy, the horses represent that ideal state of freedom, which he will long for throughout the novel but never attain.

THE JAPANESE EMPEROR

Appearing in the title of the book, Emperor Hirohito plays a crucial symbolic role for the boy. In the Japanese culture of the time, the Emperor was considered divine like a god. However, at the end of World War II, the U.S. government required Emperor Hirohito to repudiate his divinity and declare himself human. In the context of this novel, the Emperor's past divinity represents a time before the war, when the people of Japan had their national pride and their right to self-determination. For the boy, then, the Emperor and his divinity is a symbol for national pride and Japanese cultural identity. As an act of resistance, the boy repeats the name of the Emperor under his breath at the camp, proving to himself that he will not give up his heritage.

The Emperor's change from the divine to the human also represents the shift the boy goes through in the camp. Before the camp, the boy's life is full of wonder, imagination, and mystery, but the brutal reality of life at the camp slowly chips away at this imaginative spirit. Thus, we can understand the title of the novel as referring to a pre-war time of (relative) innocence and Japanese national pride, rather than the postwar time of jadedness and submission. For the boy, the loss of the magic and wonder of the world culminates when the Emperor is no longer divine.

TREES

In a novel rife with symbols, trees are perhaps the most recurring one. On the most basic level, trees represent home, one's roots in the ground. On the evening before the family is relocated, the woman plucks a leaf from their tree in the backyard, as if taking with her a memento of home before she leaves for an unknown period of time. The trees then begin to take on more symbolic significance when characters throughout the novel—including minor characters like Teizo "Ted" Ishimoto—feel shocked at the total absence of trees at the camps. For them, the lack of trees is a clear sign that the camp will never be "home." Trees are stable and require deep roots to live, but the camp is merely a temporary dwelling place, rather than a home, for the duration of the war. When the army actually tries to plant trees at the camp, they all die, illustrating the incompatibility of home with internment. With the trees dead, the army instead puts up street signs *named* after trees in a vain, superficial attempt to make the camp seem more like home. But the internment camp is only a real home inasmuch as the "Oak Street" sign is a real tree.

THE ROSEBUSH

The woman's rosebush, the principal symbol in the novel's second to last chapter, represents the ideal of freedom. While the family was interned at the Topaz camp, the rosebush was stolen from the woman's front yard. When the family returns after the war, the children scour the neighborhood looking for it, only to conclude that someone has transplanted it to a backyard somewhere. The novel ends with the children imagining the rosebush "blossoming madly, wildly, pressing one perfect red flower after another out into the late afternoon light." Overtly, the rosebush represents a hypothetical world where the family had never faced internment or racism, and could grow freely and without restraint. Yet in the real world of the novel, the rosebush and the freedom it represents are stolen from them. Afraid of being mistaken as enemies of the state again, after internment the children restrain their true identities so as to appear like docile, apologetic, and apolitical citizens. However, the fact that the children imagine the rosebush in a "stranger's backyard" rather than in a front yard suggests that the stranger is too ashamed to openly display the stolen rosebush. In this way, the stolen rosebush becomes a metaphor for one of the United States' greatest shames: the stealing of the freedoms and the potentials of its Japanese-American citizens.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *When the Emperor Was Divine* published in 2003.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"You can pay me later," he said. Then he began to wipe the side of the register with a rag. There was a dark stain there that would not go away.

Related Characters: Joe Lundy (speaker), The Woman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the unnamed Japanese woman goes to a

store, where she buys some materials from the store's owner, Joe Lundy. The woman realizes she doesn't have money to pay, but Joe generously says she can pay him back later. The passage is symbolically loaded: Joe seems like a good, regular American guy, sympathetic to people in need. And yet he's also scrubbing a mysterious stain on his register, symbolizing the "black mark" on American history that is the Japan Internment Program. Joe might be a good man, but as a white American, he's partly responsible for (or at least complicit in) the outrage of the racist internment program.

She took *The Gleaners* out of its frame and looked at the picture one last time. She wondered why she had let it hang in the kitchen for so long. It bothered her, the way those peasants were forever bent over above that endless field of wheat. "Look up" she wanted to say to them. "Look up, look up!" The Gleaners, she decided, would have to go. She set the picture outside with the garbage.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Woman packs her things, preparing to be taken off to a Japanese internment camp. The woman notices one of her old possessions, a reproduction of a famous painting by Millet, depicting two women gleaning for scraps in the fields of wheat. The Woman feels frustrated with the two women--she wants to tell them to look up and (perhaps) see the economic exploitation they're the victims of. The Woman can see this about the painting, but as of yet she's still seemingly unaware of the way her own government abuses her: on a whim, she's been sent to an internment camp, despite the fact that she's never done anything wrong. For now, she assumes that being a good American citizen just means doing what she's told--she trusts that the government won't do her any harm if she doesn't do anything wrong.

White Dog rolled over and looked up at her with his good eye. "Play dead," she said. White Dog turned his head to the side and closed his eyes. His paws went limp. The woman picked up the large shovel that was leaning against the trunk of the tree. She lifted it high in the air with both hands and brought the blade down swiftly over his head...She picked up White dog and dropped him into the hole...She pulled off her gloves and looked at them. They were no longer white. She dropped them into the hole and picked up the shovel again. She filled the hole.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this shocking passage, the Woman kills her beloved dog because she won't be able to take care of it, and doesn't want it to starve: she's being taken off to a camp, and she's not bringing any pets with her. The passage is symbolically loaded: the Woman's killing is the first potentially immoral action we've seen her take in the novel--as if to symbolize her moral compromises, her gloves are no longer pure and white. Furthermore, the passage could be said to symbolize the way the American government turned on its own people: like the Woman turning on her dog, the Roosevelt administration turned on its loyal Japanese citizens and imprisoned them.

She was ten years old and she knew what she liked. Boys and black licorice and Dorothy Lamour. Her favorite song on the radio was "Don't Fence Me in."

Related Characters: The Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator emphasizes the total normalcy and "Americanness" of the characters in the novel: here, we're introduced to the Girl, who's totally innocent, but has the misfortune of being Japanese. The Girl loves all-American things, and couldn't possibly be considered a danger to anyone: and yet because of the Roosevelt administration's

internment policy, she's sent to live in a camp with her parents.

The narrator's anger is palpable in the dark sarcasm of this passage. "How is it*possible*," Otsuka seems to ask, "that *she* could be sent to a camp? What danger could she possibly pose?" And while the girl's "Americanness" is presented as an example of just how far-fetched the racist suspicions of Japanese Americans were, it also shows how fully she has assimilated--she feels little to no connection to the Japanese culture of her parents.

In a few hours he and the girl and their mother would wake up and go to the Civil Control Station at the First Congregational Church on Channing Way. Then they would pin their identification numbers to their collars and grab their suitcases and climb up onto the bus and go to wherever it was they had to go.

Related Characters: The Woman, The Girl, The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the Woman and her family prepare to go off and report to the Civil Control Station. The Woman knows that she's going to be sent to the internment camps soon, and she's frightened: still, she doesn't have many other options. She's a law-abiding citizen, and so even when her government orders her to go to prison unjustly, she follows her orders to the letter. The passage is especially chilling because the Japanese internment program occurred at the same time as another forced-imprisonment program that occurred along racial lines--the mass imprisonment of the Jews and other minorities in Hitler's Germany. The narrator subtly emphasizes the similarities between Japanese internment and the Holocaust by noting the "identification numbers" that the Japanese had to wear, and the uncertain future that the Japanese-Americans faced as they climbed aboard mass transportation.

Chapter 2 Quotes

All summer long they had lived in the old horse stalls in the stables behind the racetrack. In the morning they had washed their faces in the long tin troughs and at night they had slept on mattresses stuffed with straw...On their first night there her brother had plucked the stiff horse hairs out of the freshly white-washed walls and run his fingers along the toothmarks on top of the double Dutch door where the wood was soft and worn.

Related Characters: The Boy, The Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Japanese-American families are herded into horse stables and treated like animals. They're forced to sleep and live in the same quarters that used to house horses--moreover, the younger Japanese-Americans see evidence of the link between their own lives and those of the horses, as here, the Boy sees the bite marks that the horses have made in the wooden doors of the stables.

The passage underscores the dehumanizing effects of the Japanese Internment program. The Japanese families who were imprisoned during World War Two had committed no crime, and many of them were proud Americans. And yet they were treated like dangerous criminals, and imprisoned for their potential disloyalty to America. In the process, the Japanese came to see that their government didn't think of them as people at all--just dangerous animals.

In the middle of the aisle a young girl of five or six was playing with a dirty doll on the floor. The doll had curly yellow hair and big china eyes that opened and closed.
"What's your doll's name?"
"Miss Shirley." The young girl held the doll up shyly. "Mama bought her for me from the Sears catalog."
"She's beautiful."
"You can't have her."
"That's all right." The girl continued down the aisle.

Related Characters: The Girl (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a young Japanese girl sees another girl playing with a doll. The doll depicts a beautiful American girl (seemingly named after Shirley Temple, a cute American child-star of the period).

The passage underscores how assimilated many of the Japanese-Americans in the camp became in the years leading up to their interment--which makes the fact that they've been sent to the camp all the more absurd. The passage also shows young people internalizing Western beauty standards: because they're surrounded by American dolls ordered at American department stores, they're subtly taught that whiteness equals beauty, and their aesthetic standards are based on blonde hair and blue eyes--leading to internalized inferiority complexes for those who don't fit into such categories.

"I forgot my umbrella. I thought I brought it but I didn't." His mother gave him an orange. "You can't remember everything," she said.
"And even when you can you shouldn't," said the girl.
"I wouldn't say that," said her mother.
"You didn't," said the girl.
"We'll find you another umbrella when we get off the train," said his mother.
"We're never getting off this train," said the girl.
"We are," said her mother. "Tomorrow."

Related Characters: The Girl, The Woman, The Boy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Girl and her family are on a train, speeding toward in uncertain future. The Boy notices that he has forgotten his umbrella back at home, and laments this. The fact that Boy is mourning something as trivial as an umbrella reminds us of the fact that the Woman's family has left behind something much more important: freedom. The scene is also poignant because the Girl, cynical and precocious, claims that they're never going to get off the train--they'll be trapped there forever. Childish though the Girl's fears are, they reflect the very relatable fear (surely a very common fear among the Japanese-American families in the camps) that they'd never see freedom again. The Woman acts as a role model for her children, telling them to remain optimistic, even when the future doesn't look good.

She pulled back the shade...and saw a herd of wild mustangs galloping across the desert...The dark bodies of the horses were drifting and turning in the moonlight and wherever they went they left behind great billowing clouds of dust as proof their passage. The girl lifted the shade and pulled her brother to the window and pressed his face gently to the glass and when he saw the mustangs...he let out a low moan that sounded like a cry of pain but was not. He watched the horses as they galloped toward the mountains and he said, very softly, "They are going away." Then a soldier with a flashlight and a broom came walking down the aisle. The girl let the shade fall back against the glass and told the boy to return to his seat.

Related Characters: The Boy (speaker), The Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the train passes by a herd of wild horses, which the family sees from its train car. The Boy and Girl peer out of the window and sees the horses, and they are moved by their beauty and freedom. There is something sublime about this moment, particularly in its contrast of the horses' wildness to the family's situation on the train. The horses have the freedom to "go away" as they please, while the Japanese Americans on the train are imprisoned. At the same time, the passage also suggests a similarity between the horses and the people on the train: like the horses, the family is "going away" to an internment camp--a place that's just as foreign and mysterious to the Boy as the destination of the wild horses.

At Topaz the bus stopped. The girl looked out the window and saw hundreds of tar-paper barracks sitting beneath the hot sun. She saw telephone poles and barbed-wire fences. She saw soldiers. And everything she saw she saw through a cloud of fine white dust that had once been the bed of an ancient salt lake. The boy began to cough and the girl untied her scarf and shoved it into his hand and told him to hold it over his nose and mouth. He pressed the scarf to his face and took the girl's hand and together they stepped out of the bus and into the blinding white glare of the desert.

Related Characters: The Boy, The Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the family finally gets off the bus and prepares to enter the internment camp. The first vistas of Topaz, the family's new home, are pretty grim: the air itself is hard to breathe, since it's full of dust. The passage is symbolic for a couple reasons. The Girl urges her brother to protect himself from the dust by breathing through cloth--a rare moment of maturity and selflessness for the Girl, as she seems to connect with her family in this moment of fear and confusion. Furthermore, the blinding whiteness of the dust is potentially a subtle symbol for the racist ideology that allows white Americans to blindly and ignorantly send Japanese-American citizens to camp.

Chapter 3 Quotes

For it was true, they all looked alike. Black hair. Slanted eyes. High cheekbones. Thick glasses. Thin lips. Bad teeth. Unknowable. Inscrutable.

Related Characters: The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Boy arrives at the internment camp and immediately notices a long row of Japanese prisoners. The Japanese-American camp residents are all American citizens, but to the Boy, they all look exactly the same. It's hard to know how to interpret this observation. One could certainly argue that the Boy has internalized some of the racist ideas of his society--the old, offensive stereotype that all Asians look alike, and are somehow "inscrutable" (part of the reason why the Japanese Americans were imprisoned in the first place--the government felt it couldn't trust or understand them). One could also say that the Boy is responding to the dehumanizing effects of the internment program: the proud Japanese Americans have been dehumanized by their internment, and in the process they've lost some of their individuality and personality.

Whenever the boy walked past the shadow of a guard tower he pulled his cap down low over his head and tried not to say the word. But sometimes it slipped out anyway, *Hirohito*, *Hirohito*, *Hirohito*. He said it quietly. Quickly. He whispered it.

Related Characters: Emperor Hirohito, The Boy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Boy passes by some of the American guards who run the camp--he's walking by the huge guard tower that looks down on the Japanese-American camp residents. In spite of the fact that he's so close to Americans, the Boy mutters the name "Hirohito" to himself--the name of the Japanese Emperor, considered a divine presence. Hirohito was the Emperor during World War II, and he was popular even among Japanese-Americans. Thus, for the Boy to mutter Hirohito's name is a quiet act of rebellion: he's naming the spiritual leader of America's enemy, and he's showing his allegiance with Japanese culture. The Boy is frightened of the guards, but he finds tiny ways to rebel against their authority and retain his dignity and culture in an environment of racism and dehumanization.

One evening as the boy's mother was hauling a bucket of water from the washroom she ran into her former housekeeper, Mrs. Ueno. "When she saw me she grabbed the bucket right out of my hands and insisted upon carrying it home for me…I tried to tell her that she no longer worked for me. 'Mrs. Ueno,' I said, 'here we're all equal,' but of course she wouldn't listen. When we got back to the barracks she set the bucket down by the front door and then she bowed and hurried off into the darkness. I didn't even get a chance to thank her."

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), Mrs. Ueno, The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

In this surprising passage, the Woman reunites with Mrs. Ueno, the woman who used to work as a maid for the Woman. Although the Woman and Mr. Ueno are now social equals--they're both prisoners within the internment camp--Mrs. Ueno insists on acting like a maid around the Woman: here, for example, she carries a heavy bucket for the Woman.

Why would Mrs. Ueno voluntarily continue to act as a maid to the Woman? Perhaps the easiest answer is that there's comfort in routine--by acting the part of a maid, Mrs. Ueno is trying to forget her present situation and pretend the usual divides of social class are present in the camp (even though she herself belonged to a lower class). There's comfort in remembering a time when she at least had a regular job, and was treated like a regular citizen of the United States.

> In early autumn farm recruiters arrived to sign up new workers, and the War Relocation Authority allowed many of the young men and women to go out and help harvest the crops...They said they'd been shot at. Spat on. Refused entrance to the local diner. The movie theater. The dry goods store. They said the signs in the windows were the same wherever they went: NO JAPS ALLOWED. Life was easier, they said, on this side of the fence.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66-67

Explanation and Analysis

This passage conveys the extent of the hostility to Japanese-American in the United States at the time. Some of the Japanese internment camp residents go out to work outside the camp and harvest crops. But when these workers return to the camps at the end of the season, they say they don't want to leave the camps again. The world outside the fences of the internment camp has become even more harsh and racist to Japanese-Americans. America is locked in a deadly war with the nation of Japan, and Japanese-Americans are considered traitors.

While this is a depressing example of vicious racism in America, the passage also provides another view on imprisonment and "domestication." Like the family's bird that didn't want to leave its cage, some of the Japanese Americans come to find comfort in their imprisonment--they aren't free or fulfilled, but at least they're protected from some of the dangers and cruelties of the wider world. Of course, this is no justification for the Internment program itself, but here Otsuka does offer an interesting view on the psychology of imprisonment.

> In the dream there was always a beautiful wooden door. The beautiful wooden door was very small—the size of a pillow, say, or an encyclopedia. Behind the small but beautiful wooden door there was a second door, and behind the second door there was a picture of the Emperor, which no one was allowed to see. For the Emperor was holy and divine. A god.

Related Characters: The Boy, Emperor Hirohito

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Boy has a recurring dream about the Emperor of Japan, Hirohito. Hirohito is a clear symbol of the Boy's Japanese heritage, in all its strengths and weaknesses. The fact that the Boy can only access his Japanese heritage in dreams is a sad reminder of his present situation: he lives in camps where Japanese culture of any kind is frowned upon and even considered treacherous.

The Boy's dreams suggest that he acutely feels the struggle between his American citizenship and his Japanese heritage. Americans have thrown him in a camp under the delusion that he's a danger to the country, and yet the Boy is clearly pretty ignorant of Japanese culture; he has only the vaguest idea who the Emperor is or what he symbolizes (if the Boy knew a little more about Hirohito's life, he might not like him so much). In short, the passage sums up the ironies of the internment program: the American soldiers were guarding the Japanese people who were *least* likely to feel any strong connection with Japan, or be traitorous to America in any substantive way.

"I lost an earring on the train. Did I ever tell you that?"
He shook his head…
"What did it look like?"
"It looked like a pearl," she said. "It was a pearl."
"Maybe it rolled behind the seat."
"Or maybe," she said, "it's just gone. Sometimes things disappear and there's not getting the back. That's just how it is…I had no business wearing those earrings in the first place," she said after a while. "No business at all."

Related Characters: The Boy, The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85-86

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Mother remembers losing a beautiful pearl earring on the train to the camp. The Mother brings it up to the Boy, but immediately she comes to a cynical acceptance: she's lost the earring and she's not getting it back. The Mother's next choice of words is interesting: she claims that she has "no business" wearing earrings at all.

The passage could be said to symbolize the loss of Japanese identity and pride in the course of the internment program. The Mother loses her pearl earring (in Japan, pearl is a highly prized form of jewelry, and it's not unreasonable to guess that the Mother's pearl earrings came from her old life in Japan, not her new life in America). Just as the Mother loses her earring, she loses her contact with Japanese culture and heritage--she's lost it and she's (seemingly) never getting it back. Furthermore, the Woman has now internalized the racist idea that she herself is somehow dangerous or "wrong," and so she feels that she had "no business" showing off or making herself stand out in any way by wearing pearl earrings. The camps have robbed her not only of a connection to Japanese culture, but also of her own pride as an American and a human being.

She'd been in America for almost twenty years now. But she did not want to cause any trouble—"The nail that sticks up gets hammered down"—or be labeled disloyal. She did not want to be sent back to Japan. "There's no future for us there. We're here. Your father's here. The most important thing is that we stay together."…
Loyalty. Disloyalty. Allegiance. Obedience.
"Words," she said, "it's all just words."

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Man / The Father, The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Woman makes a difficult choice. The army has come to the internment camps and asked for "volunteers" to join the military. there's a pretty clear program of coercion going on here (as evidenced by the fact that men who refuse to join the armed forces are sent to a different, presumably harsher camp), and so the Mother is understandably frightened that something bad will happen if she doesn't agree to the loyalty pledge.

In the end, the Mother agrees to pledge her loyalty to the U.S., because she thinks that her pledge is meaningless. She isn't particularly interested in the abstract notions of allegiance or obedience to U.S. authority--her real priority is her children, and therefore she'll do whatever she needs to do to stay with them, even if this means compromising her ideals and "keeping her head down."

Years later the boy would recall standing beside his mother at the service, wondering just what kind of flower it was the man had seen.
A rose? A tulip? A daffodil?
And if he *had* plucked it. Then what?
He imagined exploding ships, clouds of black smoke, hundreds of B-29s falling down in flames from the sky.

Related Characters: The Woman, The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101-102

Explanation and Analysis

In this bitterly sardonic passage, the Boy watches as a Japanese internment camp resident is buried--he was shot for trying to venture outside the camp to pick a flower.

The passage reinforces the absurdity of the interment program itself: despite minimal evidence of espionage in America, Japanese-Americans were sent into camps under the delusional belief that they'd plot the destruction of the American military. This absurdity is both emphasized and made tragically beautiful in the Boy's imagination--he sees the dead man's quest for the flower as something meaningful and powerful, an act that could destroy the

American army, or, perhaps, simply bring an end to the war itself.

❝ Several days later, the street signs appeared. Suddenly there was an Elm Street, a Willow Street, a Cottonwood way… "It doesn't look like we'll be leaving here any time soon," said the boy's mother.
"At least we know where we are," said the girl.

Related Characters: The Girl, The Woman (speaker), The Boy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1021

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the American guards try to make the internment camp "homier" and more enjoyable for the Japanese-American residents. First they plant trees, but these soon die. Then in their place they put up street signs *named*after trees: there's an Elm Street, a Willow Street, and probably a Maple Street, too. On one level, this shows how unnatural the camp is--the families there aren't in any kind of real "home," any more than a street named "Elm Street" is an elm tree. But in another sense, these street names are very much "American," emphasizing the overpowering whiteness and Americanness of the camp: all traces of Japanese culture are wiped out, replaced by bland American place names.

The Girl sarcastically comments, "We know where we are," when in fact, the Japanese-American prisoners have no idea where they "are"--they're displaced from their Japanese heritage, as well as their American citizenship.

❝ He traced out an SOS in huge letters across the firebreak but before anyone could read what he had written he wiped the letters away.

Related Characters: The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Boy traces an SOS in the ground, having heard that prisoners and castaway will sometimes do so in an effort to be rescued by passing airplanes. Of course, the Boy realizes his mistake: no airplanes are going to rescue the Japanese-Americans--they've been confined to the internment camps on the orders of the President himself.

The passage could also be taken more symbolically: an echo of the scene earlier in the novel in which the Boy writes his name in the dust. The Boy is beginning to realize that no external forces are going to save him from his depression or loneliness--he's going to have to take care of himself. Thus, the passage is a sign of both the Boy's growing maturity and the danger of him losing his sense of self, both changes precipitated by the internment process.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ We put down our things and ran from one room to the next shouting, "Fire! Help! Wolf!" simply because we could.

Related Characters: The Girl, The Boy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the family returns from the internment camp to the house where they used to live. Predictably, the house has fallen into disrepair—it's full of trash and broken bottles, and has been vandalized with racist slurs. While the Japanese internment program was initiated for supposedly noble reasons—the protection of American citizens—its most tangible result is far more vulgar: the robbery and vandalism of Japanese-American houses.

The children have a fascinating reaction when they realize their house was robbed: they run through the halls screaming about the damage. It's as if the children have been forced to keep silent about their problems for so long (who could they complain to when the American soldiers forced them to leave their homes?) that it's satisfying just to yell things that are usually forbidden (like crying "fire" when there is no fire).

Nothing's changed, we said to ourselves. The war had been an interruption, nothing more. We would pick up our lives where we had left off and go on. We would go back to school again. We would study hard, every day, to make up for lost time. We would seek out old classmates…We would listen to their music. We would dress just like they did. We would change our names to sound more like theirs. And if our mother called out to us on the street by our real names we would turn away and pretend not to know her. We would never be mistaken for the enemy again!

Related Characters: The Girl, The Boy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

In this chilling passage, the children of the Woman return to their old lives—and they find that little has changed: the radio programs are the same, their food is the same, their street is the same, etc. The children are young enough to think that their lives can go on, exactly as they had before the war, without any further problems, as long as they try to deny their Japanese heritage and fit in with their white peers.

Of course, there is a very dark undercurrent to the false optimism of this passage. The Japanese-American community has come to see how fragile its place in the U.S. really is: at the drop of a hat, the President can sign an executive order and pull the people away from their houses. Granted, many Japanese-American families returned to their old lives after being released from the camps, and found prosperity and acceptance within the American mainstream. But this passage suggests that they partly were so desperate for American success because of a desire to avoid being interned again. They believed (whether consciously or not) that if they kept their heads down, didn't make trouble or demand justice, and succeeded in school and work (i.e., became the "model minority" of America) they'd never be "mistaken for the enemy again." This shows how the very idea of the "model minority" is flawed and racist, and the result of an internalized "imprisonment" (suppressing one's culture and true desires out of fear) that is just another incarnation of the literal imprisonment of the internment camps.

And when our mother pushed us gently, but firmly, from behind, and whispered, *Go to him*, all we could do was stare down at our shoes, unable to move. Because the man who stood there before us was not our father. He was somebody else, a stranger who had been sent back in our father's place. *That's not him*, we said to our mother, *That's not him*, but our mother no longer seemed to hear us…He got down on his knees and he took us into his arms and over and over again, he uttered our names, but still we could not be sure it was him.

Related Characters: The Girl, The Boy, The Woman (speaker), The Man / The Father

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 131-132

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Boy and Girl reunite with their Father. Yet when they see him, he's been so utterly transformed by his experiences (experiences which we've yet to hear about) that his children can't even tell who he is. Although the passage is narrated from the perspective of the Girl and the Boy, it's the Mother and Father who bear the real burden of sadness: when the children say they can't even recognize their own father, it's a safe guess that both parents feel crushed. Furthermore, the Father's strangeness to his children suggests that he has become just as "inscrutable" as the other male Japanese prisoners, those whom the Boy long ago felt "all looked the same." His role as a dehumanized prisoner has actually robbed him of his identity and individuality.

The passage is a tragic refutation of the idea that the Japanese-American families will be able to "go back to normal" after internment, as the Boy and Girl childishly tried to believe. In fact, internment has changed family so utterly that normality will never be possible again. (The passage is also a good example of the way that internment has wiped out Japanese heritage in the young generation of Japanese-American children: the young Boy and Girl feel little to no connection to their "father land," as symbolized by their confusion when facing their own father.)

Chapter 5 Quotes

I spied on you—you get up at six, you like bacon and eggs, you love baseball, you take your coffee with cream, your favorite color is blue.

Related Characters: The Man / The Father (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Man sarcastically confesses to his supposed "crimes." He claims that he planted dynamite on train tracks, sabotaged the American war effort, etc. He adds that he's been spying on Americans—watching them take their coffee, watch baseball, and so on. The truth, of course, is that the Man has done nothing of the kind: he's just a regular American citizen who's being scapegoated by the racist, intolerant American society of the 1940s.

The novel has used sarcasm and irony to make a point before, but never as bitterly as in this closing chapter. The Man knows he's done nothing wrong: he's lashing out in impotent rage against the powerful American officials who've arranged for him to be detained. More subtly, the passage implies that in being detained by American officials for his supposedly un-American behavior, the Man has actually become more anti-American: he's come to resent the Americans who've stripped him of his rights, and now hates American culture, too (baseball, bacon and eggs, etc.).

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: EVACUATION ORDER NO. 19

In third person, the opening chapter follows the perspective of an unnamed, Japanese American character: the woman. In Berkeley, California, on a sunny day in the spring of 1942, the forty-year-old woman sees a sign in the post office window. There are signs just like this one plastered all over town, all of them having appeared overnight. She reads the sign from top to bottom and then goes home to pack.

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the forced evacuation and internment of all people of Japanese ancestry living in the United States. The government feared that Japanese Americans would side with Japan during the war and engage in acts of sabotage and espionage against the United States. The chapter title refers to the official name given to signs just like the one the woman reads. These signs announced that the U.S. Army would deport all Japanese Americans to military camps, thus commencing Japanese American internment. From the start, the woman (like all the main characters) is unnamed. This highlights the universality of the story, but also suggests how white Americans saw all Japanese Americans as essentially the same—suspicious characters without individual identities.

Nine days later, the woman is still not finished packing. She pulls on her white silk gloves and goes to the local hardware store to buy packing supplies. She brings a ball of twine and tape to the counter to pay, but the owner of the store, Joe Lundy, says that she can pay him later. As he says this, Lundy vigorously tries to clean a **stain** from the side of the register. He then gives the woman two candies for her two children. The woman wishes she had gotten to know the storekeeper better during all the years she has been coming to his store. She thanks Lundy by name before leaving for home.

Since white gloves were associated with the middle class at this time, the woman's gloves reveal her class status. Though the woman's economic class will shift over the course of the novel, this early scene firmly cements her initial role in the middle class. The stain is also the first major symbol to appear in the novel. As one of the United States' greatest shames, Japanese American internment will mar, or stain, *American history forever. While Lundy's friendliness suggests that he does not believe the woman is a dangerous spy, his vain attempt to erase the stain symbolically suggests that all white Americans are "stained" by internment, even those who disagreed with the evacuations but did nothing to stop them.*

When the woman gets home, she finishes packing: she rolls up the Oriental rug in the living room, takes down the mirrors, and plants the tiny bonsai **tree** in the yard. She goes upstairs to pack up her son's stamp collection, his comic books, and his toys. She only leaves out his baseball glove and his clothes so that he'll remember to put them in his suitcase later. In the kitchen, she takes down a picture of Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners*, which shows peasants bent over an endless field of wheat. She feels bothered by the picture and wants to tell the peasants to "Look up, look up!" She decides that she always hated the painting and throws it into the garbage.

The woman responds to the news of internment with little outward emotional distress. She packs casually as if for a trip rather than for a forced evacuation. Trusting that her government will do no wrong towards its citizens, she does not even consider resisting the order. The woman also seems to transfer a repressed urge to resist onto the image of the peasants. She urges them to "look up!" and recognize the economic oppression they endure. But the peasants—like the woman—still consent to their own oppression. This theme of accepting injustice will be explored throughout the novel. Descriptions of the woman's house all seem deliberately mundane—she has essentially achieved the "American Dream" of owning a house in the suburbs, having children, a boy who plays baseball, etc. But soon we learn that the American Dream is not designed for minorities, as not even the family's wealth and "normalcy" can protect them from racism.

The woman packs everything in her house into boxes and carries them into the sunroom. She locks the doors with two padlocks and then goes outside and lights a cigarette. The house is empty expect for the piano and the furniture that she can't transfer to the locked room. Tomorrow, she thinks, she and her children will be leaving their home. She doesn't know where they're going, or for how long. From reading the sign outside the post office, the woman knows she can bring clothes and bedding but not much else. She cannot bring **pets**. She has given their cat to the neighbors. She caught the chicken, which had been running wild in the yard since the fall, snapped its neck, and served it for dinner.

So far we've learned little about this woman other than that she is middle class and of Japanese descent, and it becomes more clear that she will remain *unnamed—thus standing in for the hundreds of thousands of Japanese citizens who, like her, read signs and learned about internment. The chicken's loss of freedom also foreshadows the woman's imminent internment. Animals in the story represent varying degrees of imprisonment and freedom, starting here with the chicken.*

In the kitchen, the woman prepares some eggs and salmon in a bowl and lays it out on the front porch. She claps her hands a few times and an old white **dog** comes limping out of the **trees**. "Eat up, White Dog," she says. The woman thinks about how the grass hasn't been mowed for months. Her husband usually mowed, but she hasn't seen him since he was arrested last December as an "Alien Enemy" and transferred to a detention camp at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

During internment, the U.S. government rounded up many Japanese adult men for interrogation without first producing evidence that they committed any crimes. Today, it is widely agreed upon that the U.S.'s actions were motivated by anti-Asian racism rather than by legitimate concerns that Japanese Americans were spying for Japan.

The woman puts on her gloves and with the twine she bought from the store, she ties the **dog** to the big **tree** in the backyard. She tells the dog to play dead and it rolls over. She then takes a shovel and brings it down swiftly onto the dog's head, killing it. Beneath the tree, the woman digs a hole for the dog and drops him in along with her white gloves, which are now **stained** and no longer white. The woman feels very tired, and her back is drenched in sweat. She plucks a leaf from the tree and goes back inside the house.

The woman kills White Dog out of mercy so that it won't starve when the family is gone, but the stain suggests that even this act of violence will have lasting psychological effects on her. In this way, all violence appears to leave stains, echoes, and traces that affect us into the future. White Dog also represents the Japanese Americans themselves. Like the Japanese Americans who trust the government to protect them, White Dog—a pet and domesticated animal—trusts the woman even as she kills it.

When her children come home from school, the woman reminds them they're "going on a trip" tomorrow. The girl, who is ten, says she knows. Like a typical American girl, the girl likes boys, candy, and Dorothy Lamour. She wears Mary Jane shoes and her favorite song on the radio is "Don't Fence Me In." The boy is seven and he wears a black fedora tilted to one side of his head. The hat was a present from his father, and he wears it everyday. The boy opens the door to the backyard and calls **White Dog**'s name, but the dog doesn't appear. The boy says that the dog is getting deafer all the time, and then he heads back inside.

The different family members seem to represent different degrees of assimilation into American culture. The girl, for her part, is the most "assimilated," as she is steeped in American culture and seems to have no real sense of Japanese identity. Her love of the song "Don't Fence Me In" also foreshadows the approaching internment.

As they sit down for dinner, the girl looks into her spoon and asks the woman if anything is wrong with her face. The girl says that people stared at her all day. The woman says she looks fine, that she has a fine nose and a fine set of teeth. The girl then asks if her mother would tell if there *were* something wrong with her face. The woman responds by looking the girl in the eyes and saying she has the most beautiful face that she has ever seen.

The girl's anxiety about her appearance probably stems from an "inferiority complex." Because she is surrounded by standards of beauty that emphasize whiteness, and the white people in town stare at her because they consider her part of the "enemy," she internalizes this constant racism and assumes that something is wrong with her, *not with them. The mother tries to be affirming, but she probably can do little in the face of an entire society that condemns the very idea of being Japanese.*

After the children go to sleep, the woman takes their pet **macaw** from the birdcage. The bird says, "Get over here," and the woman thinks its voice sounds like her husband's. She imagines her husband with an arm flung over his eyes, lying on a cot in a tent at Fort Sam Houston. The woman kisses the bird on its head before opening the window and placing it on the ledge outside. When she closes the window, the bird taps on the pane with its claw, and then flies into a **tree**. The woman takes a broom and goes outside, shaking the branches and yelling at the bird to leave. The bird flies off into the night.

The bird's refusal to be free illustrates the psychological power of incarceration. The bird has learned the safety and security that comes with imprisonment. It doesn't have to worry about predators or where its next meal is coming from, and the cage is now its "home." Because of these advantages, the bird has consented to its imprisonment and must be forced to accept its freedom. The bird therefore foreshadows how the family will struggle with learning to reclaim their freedom after internment.

The woman takes a bottle of plum wine, sits down on the floor, and drinks. Without the **bird** in the cage, the house feels empty to her. After a few sips, she begins to laugh at the ridiculous emptiness of her house, but her laughter soon turns to tears. She wipes her mouth with a white cloth and her lips leave a dark **stain**. In a few hours, the three of them will go to the Civil Control Station near the First Congregational Church. They will pin their identification number to their collars, climb onto the bus, and "go to wherever it was they had to go."

Throughout the chapter, the woman has prepared for internment with aloof practicality. Now, however, seeing her home emptied of all its possessions—all the signs of her stable and happy life—causes her to realize the full emotional impact of their leaving. Even though she has finally realized her feelings, the woman still feels as if she has no other choice than to obey the orders. Having lived as a law-abiding citizen her entire life, the woman has been conditioned to obey the government. Thus, we already see that she—like most citizens—has internalized behaviors that will lead her to accept her own imprisonment.

CHAPTER 2: TRAIN

This chapter follows the perspective of the girl. As the train slowly moves through the Nevada desert, it passes a dry lakebed. The girl asks for a lemon and the woman gives it to her. The soldiers had left a crate of lemons and oranges at the back of the train. The girl throws the lemon out the window and hits a **tree**. The woman tells her not to lose her arm sticking it out the window, and the girl sasses back that she wasn't planning to. The girl has lived in California all her life, but now the train is taking her to Utah. The rocking of the train makes the girl sick, and she heaves into a brown brag that her mother gives her.

In this chapter, trees gain symbolic importance. Previously, trees in the novel were part of the background, or everyday features of the suburban landscape. Now, as the family travels to the internment camp, the trees begin to thin out, eventually disappearing all together. The trees, with their stability and roots in the ground, will come to represent home. The absence of the trees is thus an overt reminder that the family is no longer home, but in a seemingly transitory "in-between" place.

The train whistles and a soldier comes through the compartment, telling everyone to pull the shades down. A man next to the girl says something to her in Japanese and she responds that she is sorry, she only speaks English. The girl notices that the train is passing through a town. The last time the train passed through a town with the shades up, someone threw a rock through the window.

The brief conversation the girl has with the old man emphasizes her assimilated American identity. Though she and her family are being treated as spies, the girl has little connection to her Japanese heritage. The fact that she is a typical American girl makes it clear how racist it was to believe that Japanese people cannot assimilate, and therefore must be Japanese spies.

The girl pulls up the shades when the soldiers tell them it's okay again. As she looks out the window, the boy asks if she thinks they'll see any **horses**. The girl remembers reading a *National Geographic* article about how Nevada has the most wild horses of any state. She tells her brother that they'll probably see some horses. The boy lays his head on her lap to sleep, while the girl thinks about the first time her brother started to ask about horses.

This racism appears even more absurd when we realize that soldiers are being employed to guard the Japanese Americans as if they were captured enemy combatants rather than families with children. The military presence on the train shows just how cruelly and stupidly racism and fear of the unknown can make people act.

After the family left their house, the army had moved them to the **horse** stables behind the city racetrack. Families upon families of Japanese Americans crowded into the racetrack, each living in one of the stables. In the morning they washed their faces from long troughs and at night they slept on straw mattresses. The boy would often stare at the teeth marks left in the wood by the horses. One night, the boy had told the girl that he wanted to be a jockey. A man in the neighboring stall called out that jockeys were small. The man yelled that the boy should eat a lot, grow strong, and ride horses like an American cowboy.

By putting the families in stables, the U.S. Army takes away their agency and dehumanizes them, treating the Japanese Americans as animals rather than human beings. Since it's easier to harm and commit injustices against a dehumanized person, the Army uses this process to strip the Japanese Americans of their human dignity. The teeth marks on the wood also illustrate the pain of forced confinement for actual horses. Here, the domesticated horse becomes a symbol of the injustice of incarcerating living beings that are meant to be free—whether human or animal.

Back on the train, the girl goes to use the toilet in the late afternoon. As she takes her place in line, she pulls out a ribbon from her hair that her mother had tied there, and she throws it on the ground. A man next to her asks if she's all right. The girl responds by saying that it's hot in here, but it was cold last night. She says that everything is changing. The man agrees, and wipes his head with a handkerchief. The girl notices two gold letters stitched into the cloth, and asks what they stand for. The man says "Teizo Ishimoto," but that his friends call him Ted. She asks if he's a rich man, and he says "not any more."

The girl's comment about everything changing refers to more than just the weather. In this novel, notions of home are synonymous with stability and permanence (as symbolized by trees), while internment is associated with dislocation and unpredictable change. Characters will long for the stability of home since their lives are in unstable flux. The character of Ted also introduces the effects of war on social class. While he was wealthy before the war, he suggests that internment has caused him to lose his wealth. Social divisions like class will continue to disappear among Japanese Americans as race becomes the most important marker of identity.

Ted compliments the girl on her blue scarf, and the girl says that her father got it for her from Paris, but that she already had a blue scarf from when he went to Paris the last time. Ted asks if her father is on the train, and she says no, that he's being transported all around the United States. She says he's in New Mexico now. Remembering what her father had told her in a letter, the girl tells Ted that there are no **trees** in New Mexico. Ted responds, "No trees!" and shakes his head sadly, as if this were a strange and terrible thing.

Otsuka cements the family's middle class status when the girl says that her father has gone to Paris twice, a sign that the family has achieved the economic prosperity associated with the American dream. Yet, their wealth cannot protect the family from racism and internment. As soon as the government turns on its Japanese American citizens, the family's wealth and perceived security offer little protection. Ted's exclamation at the lack of trees also signals how trees symbolize familiarity and home. A land that lacks trees seems strange and terrible, foreign and unfamiliar.

The girl goes into the bathroom, looks at herself in the mirror, and thinks that she is a plain girl with a plain scarf. She smiles at the corner of her lips, which she thinks makes her look like her mother, but also less mysterious. When she walks out, the girl tells Ted that her father never writes to her. This is a lie, though, since her father has written to the family every week since his arrest. Ted says that's a shame, and then excuses himself to go into the bathroom.

As an assimilated American, the girl has internalized white beauty standards. Since her facial features do not align with the standard image of beauty in America, she is critical of her physical appearance. In this way, Otsuka suggests that children will adopt the prevailing beliefs of their culture, even when those beliefs are overtly racist and psychologically harmful.

As the girl walks back to her seat, she passes a young child playing with a doll that has curly yellow hair and big eyes. The girl remarks that the doll is beautiful, and the child says that the girl can't have it. The girl says that's all right, and she continues down the aisle back to her seat. The girl looks at her mother and notices lines around her eyes that the girl hadn't noticed before. The girl looks to see if Ted came out of the bathroom, but instead she sees an old woman come out. She thinks that Ted must have disappeared.

The beautiful doll then illuminates how even young children come to adopt those beauty standards. Since nearly all dolls, celebrities, and public figures were white at this time, this idea of beauty becomes ingrained in a child's mind. Told by popular culture that blonde hair, white skin, and large eyes are beautiful, some Asian children like the girl will believe that they can never be beautiful.

The boy looks through his bag and says he's forgotten his umbrella. The woman tells him that you can't remember everything. The girl interjects, saying that even if you can remember everything, you shouldn't. The woman ignores her and tells the boy that they'll find him another umbrella when they get off the train. Continuing to contradict her mother, the girl says that they're never getting off the train. The woman turns to her and says that they're getting off tomorrow.

As a pre-teen, the girl is going through a rebellious stage common among American teenagers. Openly contradicting her mother, the girl turns an everyday conversation about a forgotten umbrella into a deeper discussion on loss. The girl argues—though indirectly—that we should forget the memories that pain us.

Toward evening, the girl takes out a letter that her father wrote to her. Most of the time, her father writes about the weather and his good health before asking questions about the family. In this letter, however, he wrote a P.S. note, but it was blackened out by the censors. The soldier comes through the train again, telling everyone to put their shades down. The girl's mother tells her to try to sleep.

This belief about memories is what might have prompted the girl to tell Ted that her father never writes to her. The girl might prefer if her father never sent letters at all, since it might be less painful to just not think about him than to receive his censored letters. The censoring of these letters also introduces the connection between the father and theme of the unknown. Since the father has yet to appear, he is an unknown figure for the reader. The highly censored letters emphasize how little access we have to this character's true thoughts and feelings.

The girl wakes up to the sound of a window breaking—someone has thrown a brick through the window. Startled and confused, the girl asks her mother where **White Dog** is. The woman says he's at home. The girl then pulls up the shade to see a group of **wild mustangs** galloping across the desert. She wakes her brother and gently puts his face to the glass pane. The boy lets out a low moan that sounds like a cry of pain. Very softly, he says, "They are going away." As the soldier passes by, the girl lets the shade fall again.

In contrast to the domesticated White Dog, the wild mustangs running across the plain represent utter freedom. Looking out the window, the boy admires and longs for this ideal state of wild independence. The use of the pronoun "they" in "They are going away" also allows for the boy to link the horses to the family, even to all the Japanese Americans. The family, like the horses, are going away, but instead of running to freedom, the train hurdles toward internment.

The next morning, armed soldiers with bayonets escort the passengers off the train. They board a bus and drive to a place called Topaz, where hundreds of tar-paper barracks are lined up in the middle of dried-up salt lake, surrounded by barbed-wire fences. Everything is dusty and the boy begins to cough. As they get off the bus, the girl tells him to put her scarf against his mouth. They step off the bus together into the "blinding white glare of the desert."

The descriptive focus on the bayonets and the barbed wire underline, once again, the absurdity of imprisoning children and families. However, like dehumanizing the families by putting them in stables, using these security measures might make the prisons guards feel more justified in treating innocent citizens like war criminals. An innocent man in a prison jumpsuit and handcuffs will look guilty in the same way that innocent Japanese Americans behind a barbed-wire fence will look like dangerous spies—as if both of them deserve the punishment.

CHAPTER 3: WHEN THE EMPEROR WAS DIVINE

This chapter is told through the perspective of the boy. At the beginning of their internment, the boy thinks he sees his father in the faces of the other adult male prisoners. Everyone looks alike to him: black hair, slanted eyes, thin lips, yellow skin, high cheekbones. But whenever he calls out for his father, the men turn around and the boy realizes they are not his father. When he sees these strangers' faces, he thinks that they all seem unknowable and inscrutable.

The boy's description of the Japanese prisoners shows that he's assimilated the prevalent racist beliefs about Japanese people. Using racially insensitive language, the boy expresses the stereotype that "all Asian people look alike." Additionally, their perceived "inscrutability" was the exact reason why the U.S. government locked up innocent Japanese Americans citizens in the first place. Since the government could never know for sure the loyalties of these citizens (and it also considered them inherently foreign, alien, and "inscrutable"), it just incarcerated them all.

The woman, the girl, and the boy are assigned a room in a barrack not far from the fence. There is a window above the boy's bed, and when he looks out he sees the rows of barracks and the guard towers where soldiers carry machine guns. On the first day in the camp, his mother tells him to never touch the fences, and to never to say the **Emperor**'s name aloud. In defiance of his mother's warning, the boy sometimes walks past the guard towers, pulls his hat down over his head, and whisper the Emperor's name: Hirohito. Hirohito. Hirohito.

In Japanese culture of the time, the Emperor was considered divine like a god. The woman knows that if the guards hear the boy say the Emperor's name, they will be suspicious that the boy and his family are allied with Japan and the divine Emperor. As a small act of resistance, then, the boy repeats the Emperor's name as a way of holding onto his heritage and cultural identity even as the government tries to demonize it or strip it away.

Most days in the camp consist of just waiting. Waiting for the mail, for news, for meals, for one day to end and the next to begin. The man scrubbing the dishes in the mess hall had formerly been a sales manager in an import-export business, the janitor had owned a small nursery, and the cook had always been a cook. One evening, the woman is carrying a bucket of water back to the barracks when she runs into her former maid, Mrs. Ueno. The maid immediately takes the bucket from the woman and helps her bring it to the barracks. The woman tells Ms. Ueno that she doesn't work for her here, and that they're all equals now, but the former maid doesn't listen.

In the camp, class distinctions largely disappear—especially because the rich have been stripped of their money and belongings and now share the exact same fate as the poor. Internment itself has also highlighted the racial aspect of identity, so the prisoners are more unified by their shared Japanese ethnicity than they are divided by the usual lines of class, gender, etc. But class still exists, as we see when Ms. Ueno takes up her former social role as a maid and helps carry the woman's bucket. Like the freed bird that wanted to stay in its cage, Ms. Ueno's identity as a subordinate servant-figure is comforting and familiar to her, so she naturally assumes that role even when it's unnecessary.

At night, the boy often wakes up, wondering where he is and why he's there. He thinks he must have done something terribly wrong to get his family put in this place. Other times he thinks he's still dreaming and that he'll wake up to find his father making breakfast in the kitchen.

The boy's guilt is another instance of characters accepting injustice and internalizing it as an inferiority complex. Believing in the essential goodness of the government, the boy looks for a personal fault or crime of his own rather than even conceiving of the possibility that an injustice has been committed by his government—the very system meant to protect him.

Every few days, letters arrive from the father. Sometimes, entire sentences are cut out by the censors, but they are always signed, "From Papa, With Love." The boy remembers his father as a small, handsome man with delicate hands. He was always polite and when he walked into a room he softly closed the door behind him. He knew which restaurants would serve their family lunch and which barbers would cut their hair. He said the best thing about America was the jelly doughnut.

Descriptions of the father's personality once again show the tragedy and blatant racism of imprisoning Japanese citizens. The father was a kind man who, though aware of racial prejudices against Asian people, found joy in American life and seemingly loved his adopted country.

The boy thinks that the dust is everywhere. Dust gets into your hair, pants, bed, and even your dreams. One night, the boy writes his name in the dust on the table in their room in the barracks. The next morning, he wakes up to find that his name is gone.

The erasure of the boy's name foreshadows how the camp will slowly chip away at his identity. Over the course of the novel, the pressures of internment will compel the prisoners to give up their Japanese cultural identity, and even all individuality itself.

In early Autumn, farm recruiters arrive to sign up the prisoners up to help harvest crops. When the prisoners come back the following season, they say that they would never go out there again. They were shot at, spit on, and denied entrance to diners, theaters, and stores. They say that it is better inside the camp.

The intense racism outside the camp complicates what it means to be "free." Previously, it seemed as if the fences marked the division between imprisonment and freedom. However, freedom for the Japanese prisoners no longer exists beyond the fences either, because "out there" they would face everyday oppression and restrictions from white citizens. Again the pet bird that refused to leave its cage provides an apt metaphor, as the people in the camp learn to accept and even prefer their internment because of the relative safety it provides in comparison to a life outside, where racists are constantly threatening your life and liberties.

Every week the people in the camp hear new rumors. They fear that they will be sterilized, stripped of their citizenship, taken out to sea and executed, deported to Japan, or given over to the Chinese for safekeeping. The soldiers tell them that they were brought to the camp as a matter of national security, and as an opportunity to prove their loyalty.

The rumors represent the fear of the unknown. Ignorant of their fates, the prisoners have no knowledge of the true intentions of their prison guards. Yet unlike the U.S. government, which also feared the unknown intentions of the Japanese American citizens, the prisoners—who have already suffered internment at the hands of the government—have real reasons to fear.

In a recurring dream, the boy always sees a wooden door. The door is the size of a pillow. Behind that door there is another door, and behind the second door there is a picture of the **Emperor**. No one was allowed to see the picture because the Emperor was divine, a god. In the dream, the boy is always about to open the second door when something goes wrong: the doorknob falls off, or he has to bend over to tie his shoe. Sometimes, a bell rings and he wakes up to find his father still absent.

Since the Emperor is a symbol of the boy's Japanese cultural heritage, his inability to see the Emperor's picture foreshadows that this identity will become more and more inaccessible. The Emperor can also be interpreted as a symbol for the father. Just like the boy yearns to gaze upon the Emperor's face, he also wishes to see his father again. This connection between Emperor and father will be developed in the next chapter.

Three FBI agents had come for the father after midnight, months before. They had taken him out of the house while he was still in his slippers. The next day, the woman lit a bonfire in the yard and burned all the letters from their family in Japan, the kimonos, and photographs of their uncle who had been a general in the **Emperor**'s army. She burned the Japanese flag and the records of Japanese opera. For the children's lunch, she packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches rather than rice balls. She told them to say they were Chinese, not Japanese.

Before the war, the family's home was full of the signs of their Japanese heritage. Though the parents raised their children as Americans, they still instilled in them a sense of Japanese identity. In this way, their home illustrates the possible coexistence of Japanese and American cultural identities. Yet after the father's arrest, the woman destroys all the cultural links to Japan out of fear the government will think the family is loyal to Japan. Fear causes her to eradicate a part of her family's identity and assimilate more fully into white American culture—essentially trying to erase their past and, as a result, part of their humanity.

The only thing the boy knew about China was that people wore their hairs in long braids, hobbled on broken feet, and that they were so poor they ate **dogs**. One day before they left for the camps, a white man had stopped the boy on the street and asked, "Chink or Jap?" The boy answered, "Chink," and ran away as fast as he could. Only when he got far enough away did he turn around and yell, "Jap! I'm a Jap!" But the man was already gone. A few days later, the signs appeared saying all Japanese had to pack up their things and leave.

The boy's perceptions of China are infused with racism, which again illustrates how he has assimilated racist beliefs about people from Asia (from both Americans and the Japanese in this case, as in Japan at the time there was also a lot of anti-Chinese racism). Even though he has adopted these beliefs, he remains proud of his heritage, fiercely holding onto his racial identity despite the external forces that compel him to repress it.

Whenever the boy thinks of his father, he imagines him at sundown leaning against a fence in a camp for dangerous enemy aliens. He likes to think of his dad as an outlaw, wearing boots and riding a big **horse**. Then the boy feels ashamed that the FBI agents led his father away in his bathrobe and slippers, and the image of his father as a cowboy disappears.

The boy's vision of his father conforms to popular Americans myths of the outlaw and the cowboy as heroes, which again illustrates the boy's assimilation into American culture. Even as the boy imagines his father as an outsider and criminal in American society, he still relies on deeply American imagery. In the boy's the mind, the father becomes an American hero while at the same time someone in conflict with the American government.

In late November, the army plants full-grown **trees** at the camp. As the woman looks at the trees from the barrack room window, she says that the soil is too alkaline and the trees will be dead by winter. She then tells the boy that she lost an earring on the train. She says that sometimes things disappear and there's no getting them back. She then turns back to the window and says she had no business wearing those earrings, "no business at all."

By planting trees—symbols of home and stability—the governments tries to accustom the prisoners to internment (or make it seem less inhumane). Yet the woman knows the trees will die and their plan will fail, because the camp will never be home. However, her claim that she had no business wearing the earrings shows that while she hasn't accepted the camp as home, she has *begun to accept her place in America's racist social hierarchy. She seems to have now internalized the idea that Japanese minorities in America have no right to the prosperity that jewelry connotes.*

In winter, the temperatures drop to ten degrees. One day, the boy taps the girl's arm while she is looking at her reflection in the mirror. He asks her where the army gets the meat they serve in the mess hall. Annoyed at being disturbed, the girl puckers her lips and says the army rounds up the **wild horses**, like the ones the boy saw on the train, and shoots them. Over the last few months, the girl has been spending less time with family. She eats all her meals with her friends, smokes cigarettes, explores the camp past curfew, and ignores the boy when he is around.

The girl's response that the army kills the wild horses symbolically connects the Japanese American prisoners to the horses. Killing the horses would mean utterly depriving them of their freedom and right to live. Likewise, the army has rounded up the Japanese citizens and taken their freedom. In this way, Otsuka associates freedom with the very essence of being alive. At the same time, she also shows how a teen girl's typical antagonism of her brother (he had been fascinated by the horses earlier) can, in such a dire situation, lead to deeper psychological troubles. The horses had been symbols of freedom to the boy, and now he feels like that freedom has been murdered.

While the girl withdraws from the family, the woman withdraws almost completely into herself. The woman spends all day inside, staring at the stoves for hours with an opened book on her lap. At times she stares at her hands, as if surprised to see them still there, and then says that she doesn't know if she's awake or asleep. Worried for his mother, the boy tries to comfort her by telling her that she is awake.

The woman loses the calm practicality that marked her identity in the first chapter. As she pulls away from the family, she becomes more mysterious, unknown, and inaccessible to both her children and the reader. The camp causes her to lose her core personality and become an "inscrutable" person with no real identity.

One day, the woman says she cannot bear the endless waiting. She hangs a white sheet around her cot and sleeps away the days, dreaming of her childhood in Japan. When she is awake, she lies on the cot and tells the boy of her dreams. For the first time in months, the boy thinks he sees his mother smile when she tells him of the bamboo fishing poles her father used when fishing for trout.

Though the woman loses parts of her identity, she tries to stay connected to herself by living in the past. Unable to cope with the reality of the present—a world where she has been dehumanized and had to sever all ties to her cultural identity—she retreats into the past, trying to escape into nostalgic memories of Japan.

In February, a team of army recruiters arrive looking for volunteers to join the military. They give out a loyalty questionnaire to everyone. When one man says he is not willing to serve in the armed forces wherever he is ordered, he is sent with his wife to a different camp for the "disloyals." In response, the woman tells the children that they shouldn't cause trouble because the "nail that sticks up gets hammered down." Loyalty, disloyalty, allegiance, and obedience are just words for her. She tells them that the most important thing is staying together, and staying in their home in America.

The woman's advice reveals the foundations of the novel's theme of the "model minority." This term refers to minority groups that have supposedly achieved high levels of socioeconomic success in America, and have "assimilated" well. Otsuka suggests that internment acted as a sort of cultural trauma in the minds of Japanese Americans, causing them to afterwards "toe the line" and be upright, unobtrusive citizens so that they would never be deported or have to face internment again.

All the **trees** die at the beginning of spring, and soon afterward a man is shot dead near the barbed-wire fence. The guard on duty said the man was trying to escape, but a friend of the dead man says otherwise—the friend claims to have seen a rare flower just outside the fence where the man was shot, and believes that the man had just been reaching out to pick the flower. At the funeral service for the man, the boy wonders what would have happened if the man had picked the flower: exploding ships, columns of black smoke, planes falling out of the sky.

The government planted the trees in an attempt to make the camp feel more like home, but the trees' death then symbolically remind us that camp is no home. At home, people aren't shot for reaching for a flower. The boy's vision of destruction also reinforces the absurdity of racism and internment. In the boy's mind, the government is so afraid of its Japanese citizens, and of letting them be free and flourish, that even a simple act of rebellion and independence like crossing a fence will bring down the American military.

When the following summer arrives, street signs with the names of **trees** appear throughout the camp. Seeing the signs suddenly appear, the woman tells the boy and girl with resignation that it doesn't look like their family will be leaving anytime soon. The girl responds that at least they now know where they are.

The street signs are another symbolic indicator of how far away the camp is from home. The internment camp is as real of a home as the sign that reads "Oak Street" is a real tree. The girl's response sounds ominous, even if it's intended as sarcastic, and indicates the total alienation the family feels from their surroundings. At the camp, they are adrift, displaced, and rootless. These street signs—a feeble attempt at giving the prisoners a sense of place and belonging—only highlight just how lost they really are.

During the heat of the summer, the boy traces an SOS in the ground, but before anyone could see it, he wipes the letters away. Late at night in his cot, the boy imagines his father arriving at the camp with a single white pearl, asking whom it belonged to. Then the boy imagines sitting next to his father on his cot. Pulling out his pipe, his father would lean back in the cot and ask the boy to tell him everything he had missed.

The boy's message directly echoes the scene where he wrote his name in the dust. While previously the dust erased his name, now he erases the message himself, illustrating how internment has affected his psychology. The boy no longer needs to wait for an external force to erase his dreams and desires. He has now learned to do it himself.

CHAPTER 4: IN A STRANGER'S BACKYARD

Using the first-person plural of "we," this chapter is written through the dual perspective of the boy and the girl. When the family arrives home after the war, the children notice that the **trees** seem taller and the **rosebush** the woman planted in the front yard is no longer there. As they walk towards their house for the first time since returning, the man next door, not the same man who was living there before the war, rakes leaves in his yard and nods to the family. The woman ignores him, making no response back. The children wonder if he is one of the men their mother warned them about, the men who would not be happy to see Japanese people returning to their homes.

The reappearance of the trees indicates that the family has finally been released (although the conflation of the children's voices into a single "we" suggests a further loss of identity and individuality). The trees, however, are not like the children remember them—the children have returned with new experiences and perspectives, meaning that their former home will look different to them now. For example, though the neighbor is seemingly friendly, the woman does not trust him anymore—he is now just another white person complicit in her internment. The woman brings her own suspicions and memories of the camp to bear on her neighborhood, changing the way she interacts with the people around her.

At the front door, the woman takes out the key that has been hanging around her neck for the entire time they've been away. Once, when the woman thought no one was looking, the boy and the girl had seen her put the key in her mouth and smile with delight. Their mother opens the door. After three years and five months, they are finally home.

The key embodies the woman's intense desire to return home. Secretly putting the key in her mouth also has erotic overtones that suggest that her desire to return home is mixed with her desire to be with her husband again.

The family finds their house in disrepair. The paint is peeling, the floor is littered with broken bottles and empty food cans, and the furniture is all gone. Despite the mess, the children run through the house, yelling "Fire! Help! Wolf!" The woman walks out the back door and stands under the shade of the **tree**. The boy and the girl think about how they came from a place without any shade, where the only trees were the ones in their dreams.

The children revel in their freedom, yelling words that most American children are told not to yell unless they must. In the camp, the boy and girl had to follow strict rules about what they could do and say. Now, by yelling these forbidden words, the children reclaim some of the freedom and agency they lost in the camp—although they still speak with one undifferentiated voice in the narrative itself. Like the trees in the street, the backyard tree symbolically indicates the family's long-awaited homecoming.

On the day before the evacuation, a lawyer had come to their house and said that he would take care of their property when the family was gone. But instead he had rented the place to squatters and never sent the family any money. In the upstairs rooms, there are soiled mattresses and old magazines with pictures of naked men and women. The sunroom has been broken into, and the vacuum, the wedding china, and all the family's valuables are gone. On the wall of one bedroom there are slurs written in red ink. Several months later, the woman gets the money to paint the walls over, but the words stay in the heads of the boy and the girl for a long time after that.

Before internment, the house was full of the signs of the family members' identities as Americans with Japanese heritage. The war has stripped that all away, however, leaving their homes and their identities empty. At the camp they had to disavow their Japanese heritage, and now they most likely feel less sure about their identities as Americans, especially since the government turned on them, classifying them as disloyal and un-American. The war has left their identities as empty as their home. The lawyer clearly knew he could exploit the family without any repercussions, as they were the "enemy" and had no rights.

On the first night back, the family all sleeps together in the room at the foot of the stairs. Long and narrow, this room resembled their room in the barracks. All night, the boy and the girl think of the stories they had heard about the people who had went home before them. One man's house was doused with gasoline and set fire with him inside. The woman makes the children sleep in their clothes because, as she says, "We will not be caught dead in our pajamas."

The family's sleeping arrangement illustrates that they cannot let go of the past. By taking up the same positions as they did in the barracks, they transport the living space of the camp into the home. In essence, they've made their home into the camp. As we have seen previously, the family has internalized their status as prisoners and cannot simply move on even now that they are home.

In the following weeks, the family eats at the table and listens to the same radio programs that they had listened to before the war. The names of the streets are the same, and the fashions people wear are the same. The boy and the girl tell themselves nothing has changed, that the war had been an interruption and they can move on now. They decide to listen to the music everyone listens to, dress like everyone else, and change their names to sound more like everyone else's names so that they will never be mistaken for the enemy again.

The boy and girl want slip into their past lives, not realizing that the camp and the memories they formed will live on inside them. The children cannot return to a time before internment, even if their neighborhood looks the same, because the children themselves are no longer the same. One way the children express this change is by giving up their connection to Japan so that they will appear more like everyone else. Here we see the seeds of the "model minority" taking root: the children want to conform to social norms because they fear being sent back to the camps.

The war relocation authority had sent each family home with train tickets and twenty-five dollars, which is the same amount given to criminals on the day they're released from prison. With this money, the woman buys thick mattresses for the boy and the girl to sleep on in the front room—until the night someone throws a whiskey bottle through the window. After that, the children sleep in the back bedroom, the one with the slurs on the walls.

By giving the family the same amount of money given to criminals, the government has labeled the family members ex-convicts, even though they have done nothing wrong. Treating the Japanese citizens as criminals also anticipates the racist climate waiting for the family outside the camp. If the government still considers them criminals, then it's not surprising that many white people will still treat them as enemies or dangerous strangers rather than neighbors and fellow citizens.

As American soldiers come back from war and tell gruesome stories of the torture they suffered at the hands of Japanese prison guards, the boy and the girl look at themselves in the mirror and see what they think is the face of the enemy. They feel guilty, but tell themselves that all they need to do is behave in order to convince everyone that they are loyal to America. From then on, they avoid their reflections in the mirrors.

Since the children have been assimilated into a deeply racist culture, they have adopted racist beliefs. Whenever they look into the mirror, they don't see individuals, but Japanese soldiers. Even to themselves, they seem like dangerous aliens. In this way, they've internalized the stereotype that all Asian people look (and are) the same. To prove that they are good American citizens, then, the children decide to obey all the rules and become "model minorities"—essentially giving up their identities and individuality out of fear.

The children's classmates at school are polite, but are no longer friendly, and the boy and the girl keep mostly to themselves. If people whisper behind their backs or call them something unkind, the children pretend not to notice. They keep their heads down and don't cause any trouble. They speak softly and follow all the rules. If they do something they feel is wrong, like accidently touch another person's arm, they imagine themselves saying that they are sorry, that they never wanted to touch you, that they've always wanted to touch you, that they will never touch you again.

This fear of returning to the camp forces the children into constructing a new, psychological prison for themselves. To be part of the model minority, the children have to repress emotions like anger and frustration. They even have to accept the racism and intolerance of their white peers without complaint. To avoid drawing criticism or even attention onto themselves, the children have to restrict their behaviors, feelings, and desires. In the end, they have simply moved from a physical prison to a prison of the mind.

The woman begins looking for work, but every time she applies for a job, the business owners say that they don't want to upset the other employees or customers by hiring her. She eventually finds a job cleaning the houses of wealthier, white families. The woman tells the boy and the girl that it's easy work. If they ask you scrub the floors, you get on your hands and knees and scrub.

With the father absent and no one bringing home a salary, the woman begins her pursuit of the "American dream" anew. With few opportunities for Japanese Americans, the woman takes a job as a domestic worker. Though her family achieved the dream of prosperity and stability before the war, she is forced to begin again from the bottom. Otsuka thus suggests that for minorities, the American dream is highly unstable. It can all be taken away in a flash. In essence, the "American dream" is designed to uphold the status quo of white superiority, and so it will always be just that—a fleeting dream—for minorities.

A telegram soon arrives from the father, saying that he will arrive in a few days. On the day of his arrival, the family waits for him at the station. When the train comes to a stop, a small stooped man steps off. His face is wrinkled, his suit faded, and his head bald. Though the boy and the girl have been waiting for him for years, they don't know what to do when they see him. The woman pushes them forward to give the man a hug, but they are unable to move because they fear that this man is not their father. Their father gets on his knees and hugs the children, uttering their names, but even then, they still can't be sure it's him.

Just as the family members have lost large chunks of their identities during the war—their cultural identities, their right to be unique and emotionally complex humans, and their class status—so too has the father lost his health and his youth. Because of all he has lost, he appears like an unknown stranger to the children. The father's identity will continue to diminish until there is practically nothing left of him.

When the father comes home, he wears dentures because he lost all his teeth while detained, and he never sings or reads stories to the boy and the girl like he used to do. He never says a word about the years he has been away, and never talks about politics or how he lost his teeth. But the children are happy he never says anything, as they don't want to know—they just want to forget.

The father's lost teeth and his change in personality reinforce how imprisonment has chipped away at his identity. The children's desire to forget will be futile, since their memories of the camp are now part of them, changing the way they act whether they know it or not.

When he first returns home, the father wanders from room to room, picking up objects in bewilderment, as if he has never seen them before. He is suspicious of everyone, and tells the boy and the girl never to trust others. Small things like a misplaced pen or a dog barking send him into a rage. No one will hire him because his health isn't good, and because he came from a camp for dangerous enemy aliens. The man spends his days scribbling in notebooks. When he asks the children about their days, he seems to be thinking about something else when they give their answers. They wonder if he is thinking of the woman, about how she is at work cleaning another person's house. Or maybe he is thinking of the headline in the newspaper he's reading: "Jap **Emperor** Repudiates His own Divinity!"

The father continues to slip away from the family, losing all the qualities that made him a loving figure in the children's memories. At the end of WWII, the U.S. government required the Emperor to repudiate his divinity and declare himself human. In the context of this novel, the Emperor's loss of divinity coincides with the family members' loss of identity. In both cases, the U.S. government has forcefully stripped away what made them unique and dignified. In the postwar era, Japanese people are marked by what they lost rather than what they have.

The father begins spending more time in his room. He stops reading the newspaper and his handwriting in his notebook grows smaller and fainter until it disappears altogether. Some days he gets dressed, but never leaves the house. He goes to sleep right after dinner because he "might as well get the day over with." He sleeps poorly, always dreaming of being locked outside the barracks five minutes past curfew, fearing that he will never get back inside.

While the children lose their original identities during a process of frightened assimilation, the chapter concludes with the father losing everything that made him *an individual—and without the aspect of assimilating into another culture. The gradual diminishment of his handwriting metaphorically reflects the diminishment of his own life and identity. Though he did not physically die in those camps, he still comes back a ghost.*

In May, when the roses everywhere burst into bloom, the boy and the girl wander the streets looking for their mother's **rosebush**. They go to other gardens and inspect other people's roses, but they never find her rosebush. Even after they give up, they never stop imagining that in some stranger's backyard, the rosebush is blossoming "madly, wildly."

Here, the rosebush represents a hypothetical world where the family never faced internment and could grow freely without restraint. Yet, in the real world of the novel, the rosebush, and the freedom it represents, was stolen from them. Now the mother works long hard hours, the children conform to the strict rules of the model minority, and the father has withdrawn almost entirely from the world. Though they are technically "free" because they are no longer in the camp, they still do not have the freedom to live their lives as they desire. They can only imagine the wild, creative freedom of the rosebush (or the wild horses), as they cannot ever claim this freedom for themselves again.

CHAPTER 5: CONFESSION

In what appears to be a first-person journal entry, the man tells his story. He says everything is true. They took him when he was in his slippers and bathrobe to an interrogation room and asked him questions. He admits that he had lied during the interrogation, that "you were always right." He admits to poisoning the reservoirs, planting dynamite along the railroads, scattering mines across the harbors, spying on your neighbors, and spying on you. He says that you get up at six, like bacon and eggs, love baseball, and that your favorite color is blue.

In the final chapter we finally see things from the man's perspective. The man sarcastically "confesses" to his crime, enumerating all things he was accused of doing. By listing them all together, it seems even more unlikely that a single man could do such much damage without there being even a scrap of factual evidence to support the government's allegations. The man also sarcastically applies the racist stereotype about all Asian people being the same to "you"—the white American public. By boiling down white American identity into the small, insignificant details he lists, the man shows just how ridiculous is to generalize a diverse group of people.

"Who am I?" the man asks. He says he's your florist, your grocer, you porter, your waiter, the owner of the dry-goods store, the shoeshine boy, the judo teacher, the Buddhist priest, the Shinto priest, the Right Reverend Yoshimoto, the one you call Jap, the one you call Slits, the one you call Gook. He says he's the one you don't see because we all look alike. He says he's the one taking over the neighborhood.

Once again, that man uses the stereotype of Asian people as being all the same to play on the fears of the white public. In this way, the man refuses to be submissive and act as the "model minority." Instead of staying silent and toeing the line, the man bitterly inflicts some of the fear and anger that he felt during internment onto the imagined white public.

The man tells you to lock him up, take his children, take his wife, assign him a number, and inform him of his crime, which is being too short, too dark, and too proud. He says he'll sign on the dotted line. And he says, "If they ask you someday what it was I most wanted to say, please tell them if you would, it was this: I'm sorry." The novel ends with him then asking, "I've said it. Now can I go?"

Unlike his family, the man clearly resents the government and understands that racism motivated internment. While his apology at the end seems to suggest that he is willing to play the role of the apologetic model minority, he only apologizes sarcastically in order to be set free. The man has been transformed by his experiences from a kind, sensitive father to a hard man who must switch between different strategies for survival: one moment he's acting as the "model minority," and the next he's bitterly declaring himself the dangerous spy. The novel thus ends with the man becoming truly inscrutable. The government has taken his right to authenticity away so that he's left with only a series of masks, and no real identity behind them. Even though we get to read his direct thoughts in this "confession," we still never get to know the man for who he really is—perhaps because he doesn't know himself.

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