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Symbols as a means of emotional
enhancement in Julie Otsuka's *When the
Emperor Was Divine*

Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was Divine* describes the fraught situation of Japanese families in America during the Second World War, highlighting in particular their evacuation and their internment. The novel depicts a time in Japanese Americans' history when racism was widespread and accepted due to the events of Pearl Harbor. The narrative style is "spare" in the sense that tragic situations are described in detail but without recourse to emotion. Instead, there is a strong reliance on symbols such as a dark stain or the name of a dog that convey the feeling of helplessness and despair. These symbols represent the different characters' emotional responses. The emotional meaning conveyed by the various symbols varies according to the context. What appear to be public symbols are, in fact, private ones in that they take on a very particular meaning in *When the Emperor Was Divine*. This essay discusses selected symbols such as the painting on the kitchen wall, the daughter's favourite song and the mother's pearl earring, highlighting the emotional impact in the particular context – textual as well as historical. The discussion will show how the symbols reveal the characters' emotions and, by that, give the reader a better understanding of what the family is experiencing. The selection of symbols has been chosen to demonstrate how the events in the novel are affecting the family.

A symbol, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is something that represents something else, "not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion" ("Symbol" 2). That is, a symbol carries a meaning, which is not clearly stated by the symbol itself but merely hinted. *Merriam-Webster* also states that a symbol is "an action, object, event, etc., that expresses a particular idea or quality" ("Symbols" n.pag.) A symbol can therefore be anything as long as it represents something else. In literature they are significant and carry a specific meaning within the context they appear in. A chain can, for example, mean "imprisonment" in one context and "union" in another. There are also two types of symbols, public and private. Public symbols are for instance flags of countries and the colours "red" and "green" that mean "stop" and "go". These symbols have a specific meaning in a particular culture or community and most people recognize them. Private symbols, on the other hand, are strictly connected to an individual work and have a specific meaning within the context they appear in. The meaning is, therefore, subjective and can vary depending on who is interpreting them. (Griffith 70).

Before the Second World War, Japanese Americans lived in independent communities in an otherwise anti-Asian environment (Ng 1). The racism and dislike were greatest in California where some individuals even considered Japanese people unable to be assimilated in the society. The racism escalated right after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7

1941, where about 1,500 Japanese Americans immediately were interned and treated as enemies. The remainder of the over 120,000 Japanese Americans, some of them American citizens, were sent to ten different internment camps within the year as a result of President Roosevelt's Executive order number 9066 (Arrington 11-13).

Similar events that happen to the family in *When the Emperor Was Divine* happened to Otsuka's own grandparents, uncle and mother. Writing the novel, Otsuka tried to understand what her own mother had been through. However, being published right after the September 11th attacks the result of the novel is greater than that. Freedman argues that the novel presented an "unplanned analogy" (n.pag.) to the aftermath of the attack, that is, an unexpected equivalence where the treatment of the Japanese Americans can be applied to the way Americans viewed Arabs and Muslims. He further presents that a comparison can be made with the slavery of the African Americans (Freedman n.pag.). According to Kakutani, the author seems to want to make the characters into representative figures by giving them no names (1), which is an explanation of why the novel can be applied to other similar historical events.

The critique on the novel is limited due to its recent publication and not much has been written about the use of symbols. However, Ali mentions the use of symbols briefly in her review where she states that Otsuka never reveals the characters' states of mind but instead does something much better, that is, "shows us" (n. pag.). The statement corresponds to what has already been established in the introduction of this essay, namely that the narrative style is "sparse" where no emotions are being expressed. The symbols play, therefore, an important role in the novel where the characters' feelings are revealed when the symbols are interpreted. This essay will present selected symbols and their specific meaning within the context they appear in, so as to reveal the characters' emotions.

The first significant symbol is when Joe Lundy tries to wipe away a "dark stain" (Otsuka 5) from the counter at his hardware store while talking to the mother. The black colour is a symbol commonly used in literature to illustrate bad or evil (Ferber 28). In this case, the dark stain symbolizes the situation of the Japanese Americans and their evacuation. Joe Lundy demonstrates his negative view on the situation the mother and her family are in by depicting the colour. He does not appreciate the treatment they are getting from the American government and by trying to wipe the stain away, he shows the mother that he wants to do something to help the family. However, the vain attempt makes it clear that no matter what he does or how much he tries, he cannot change the imminent evacuation. This realization makes Joe Lundy instead act kindly towards the mother by telling her that she can pay later (Otsuka

5) and giving her caramel candies for her children (Otsuka 6). By these acts he does what he can to make the evacuation at least a little bit easier for them, since he cannot do anything about the evacuation itself.

Another symbol that represents emotions is the painting, *the Gleaners*, that the mother takes down when preparing for the evacuation. It was painted by Jean-François Millet in 1857 and represents three female gleaners bent over, gathering leftovers of corn with their hands (Harris & Zucker n.pag.). When the mother takes down the painting she decides to throw it away since, “[i]t bothered her, the way those peasants were forever bent over above that endless field of wheat. ‘Look up’ she wanted to say to them” (Otsuka 8). An analysis of the quotation will be presented further down; first a historical perspective will be given.

The gleaners represent the Japanese Americans right after Pearl Harbor, since they are considered to be dangerous and even a threat to the society. The way the American government treats the Japanese Americans, sending them to internment camps and treating them as enemies, shows that they are at the bottom of the society where some of them even lose their rights as American citizens. The gleaners themselves were considered to be on the bottom rung of the peasant society and were urban beggars (Kimmelman 1). They were a group of poor people who were allowed to gather the scraps after the harvest with their bare hands. They were also regarded as a threat to the French society and the painting just reminded the critics of the marginalized poor in the country (*Behind the Picture*).

According to Kimmelman (1), Millet’s urban upper- and middle class audience feared the gleaners who had not benefited from the economic crisis as they had. When the painting was presented in 1857 they were reminded of the revolution in 1848 and feared that it could happen again if people in the same situation as the gleaners mobilized, just as they had done before (Harris & Zucker n.pag.). The view of the upper- and middle class of the gleaners resembles that of the Americans with respect to the Japanese Americans. The American government fears that the Japanese population will arrange attacks in America or help the Japanese forces, which is why they are treated as enemies and are considered a threat to society (Arrington 12-13).

The mother depicts the gleaners as “forever bent over” (Otsuka 8), which is a sign of submission and obedience. The Japanese Americans in the novel are submissive and they are obeying the Americans, since they are simply accepting what is happening to them. They are being told that they will be evacuated and should go home and pack and the woman, “who did not always follow the rules, followed the rules” (Otsuka 9). The mother, who has not always done as she was supposed to, this time simply obeys and packs up the families belongings and

leaves her home. Neither she nor the other Japanese Americans protest or even complain, but simply obey, showing that they are submissive towards the American government.

In reality, no matter what the Japanese Americans did, they were never really let into the Non-Japanese American society before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Those who were born in America, for instance, were educated in the American school system and knew the meaning of important terms such as citizenship, democracy and equality; they still experienced, however, discrimination in employment and housing (Ng 6). The “endless field of wheat” (Otsuka 8) that the mother is talking about is a representation of just this, that is, no matter what the Japanese Americans do to be accepted into the society and how much they follow the rules, they are still never going to be a part of it. She feels that they can keep on trying forever, but since racism is so widespread, they are not going to succeed.

The mother’s resentment of the evacuation order and the internment camps is clearly shown when she wants the peasants to “Look up” (Otsuka 8). She does not want to be in the situation she is in and she wants to urge the Japanese Americans to do something; to take a stand, protest or do anything but to simply obey. However, she only “wanted to say to them” (Otsuka 8), which means that she only wishes in her heart that something should be done. Since she cannot really tell them, the wish only stays a wish and will not become reality. It is either too late to do anything about it or the mother is simply not willing to do anything herself since there is too much at risk. She wants, just as the majority of the Japanese Americans in reality at that time, to show her support to America because she knows that her and her family’s future status in America depend on her reaction (Arrington 16).

The painting represents therefore not only the Japanese Americans and the situation they are in and their actions during this time, but also the mother’s own feelings about the situation. Having the painting on the kitchen wall for a long, demonstrates that she has felt the submissiveness for a long time. However, by throwing it away she states that she is tired of that feeling and that she does not need something to keep reminding her of it.

Another symbol that demonstrates the situation of the Japanese Americans is the family’s dog, “White Dog” (Otsuka 10). The colour “white” is in literature a public symbol for “solace”, “joy” and even “sincerity” (Ferber 233), while “dog” serves as a term for abuse and symbolizes the brute side of fallen human nature (Ferber 58-59). However, in this case there is nothing joyful about the symbol “white”, instead it represents the innocent Japanese Americans. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were treated as enemies in reality and are, because of that, accused of something they had nothing to do with. Most of the Japanese Americans had even before the war rejected Japanese civilization and considered

themselves as American citizens (Arrington 11). Their allegiance was with America, not Japan. Those who, perhaps, were unsure were those who had studied in Japan for three years or more. Paradoxically, many of them worked for the U.S. military during the war gathering information and translating, just because of their education and background in Japan (Ng 6). The Japanese Americans were therefore innocently accused and the first part of the dog's name represents this innocence.

The "dog" symbolizes the Japanese Americans and how the Americans and the American government are abusing them. Before the war, they were forced to live in separate communities because of the racism towards them, and they had difficulties in finding jobs despite having the required education (Ng 5-6). During the war, they were forced to leave their homes to be interned at a camp just because they happened to look like the enemy. They were treated the same way the dog is in the novel; he lives in the backyard just as the Japanese Americans live in the backyards of the society, they live in separate communities. The dog is not allowed to come into the house and live with the family as a family member, as the Japanese Americans are not allowed into the society and seen as equals. They have not been, and are not treated as American citizens, which *White Dog* is a reminder of.

Before the mother kills the dog she feeds him and repeats several times how he is a good dog. He is a good dog because he plays dead, which Park claims is a signal that, "to play a role is to be doomed to it" (143). In reality, the Japanese Americans are viewed and treated as enemies and they obey the American government. By obeying and playing their significant parts they are therefore automatically condemned to that role. Perhaps that is why the American government decided to send them to internment camps, to avoid an inevitable situation where they are acting out the roles they were given. However, just as the dog does what he is told because he trusts his mistress, so does the Japanese Americans because they have faith in the American government. They followed through with the evacuation because they trusted the government's decision and that it was for their and the Nation's best.

By calling the dog "White Dog" and by treating him as she does, the mother shows how unhappy she is with the situation she and her fellow Japanese Americans are in. "White Dog" is a representation of how the Japanese Americans are treated both before and during the war. There are several symbols in the novel that point to the racism towards the Japanese Americans and how they are not fully accepted in the society. These symbols are shown through the children's actions.

The first time it becomes clear that one of the children are experiencing racism is when the girl comes home the day before the evacuation and asks her mother, "Is there anything

wrong with my face?” (Otsuka 15). The girl experiences that people are staring at her and does not understand why. By asking her mother this question, she reveals that she has not encountered this side of human behaviourism before, nor that she really understands what is going on. The racism that escalated right after Pearl Harbor has thus reached even their community and the girl has started noticing that she is different from the other people in her neighbourhood.

Her mother, on the other hand, answers her that she looks “fine”, has “a fine nose” and “a fine set of teeth” (Otsuka 15). The mother brings attention to some of her features that are not severely different from other non-Japanese Americans. It is her way of telling her daughter that she is not different from anybody else, and tries, by that, to hide the racist in the statement from her. She does not explain to her why people might have been staring nor tells her why they are being sent away to the internment camp. The mother is thereby trying her best to shield her children from feeling different or from feeling like outcasts.

No matter how much the mother tries though, she cannot shield them from the other children at school. When they are at camp, the boy remembers when his sister one day, before the evacuation, comes home with her new jump rope that she had brought with her to school and says, “They let me turn the handle [...] but they wouldn’t let me jump” (Otsuka 70). The fact that she is not allowed to jump, even though it is her jump rope, shows, yet again, how the racism is all around them. She is accepted enough in the group to take part in the jumping, but she is not accepted enough to jump herself. The incident reflects, yet again, how the Japanese Americans are only partly allowed into the society. The family lives in a community where the majority of the neighbours are non-Japanese Americans. Letting the girl hold the handle of the jump rope symbolizes how the family, and other Japanese Americans, are fairly established in the society, but not letting her jump is another reminder of how they are not fully accepted.

Even though the mother tries to protect her children from the racism, it is revealed at the camp that she has failed in not letting them feel like outsiders. It is shown when the boy in the middle of the night hears a sound, which turns out to be his sister jumping rope outside in the moonlight. When she trips she says that she is “terrible” and that she does not “even deserve to hold the rope” (Otsuka 97). She says this even though she has jumped on one leg and with her arms crossed, which clearly show that she is not a bad jumper. However, both she and her brother finish the conversation with stating that she is “awful” and “the worst” (Otsuka 98). Their attitude demonstrates how they feel like they are not part of the American society or that they should be. Her friends are right to exclude her and she deserves being sent to an

internment camp. Her belief that she does not even deserve to hold the rope shows that she sees her non-Japanese American friends as better than her. She feels submissive, just as the rest of the Japanese Americans do, both in the novel and in reality.

These two symbols, that is, the girl's face and the jump rope show that the Japanese Americans were not fully accepted into the American society and that they did not, themselves, feel like they were. The girl's actions show that she considers herself too bad to be a part of it. No matter how good a jumper she becomes, she senses that she will never be equal to her non-Japanese American friends and she will never deserve to jump rope with them. This reflects yet again the Japanese Americans' situation and how they do not have equal rights as the non-Japanese population. When, for instance, they are applying for jobs, it becomes more difficult for the Japanese Americans to achieve employment even though they have the same education as the non-Japanese Americans.

Even the father fears that the children, especially the boy, will start believing what the non-Japanese Americans are saying about them when they are both in camp. He shows this by sending the boy a letter where he encourages him not to let the authorities dictate how he should feel about himself: "*And remember, it's better to bend than to break*" (Otsuka 78). In this statement he reveals what he thinks about the American government and how he believes that the boy should behave and do whatever the authorities ask of him. He should not protest or disobey, but simply adjust to life in camp. The father knows what happens to those who do not follow the government's orders and who are considered enemies, since he is currently residing in one of these camps. However, the boy should not "break", that is, he should not start believing what the non-Japanese Americans are saying about him, that he is a threat to the society and that he is inferior. He should, while following orders, remember who he is and be proud of it.

Another symbol that demonstrates what the daughter is feeling about their current situation and the inevitable internment is her favourite song: "Don't Fence Me In" (Otsuka 13). The song, originally written in 1934, was not released until 1944 (Fristoe n. pag.), that is, two years after the events in the novel. The fact that the author chooses to include the song anyway shows that it is there for a reason, namely to convey a specific meaning. The daughter does not want to be controlled and interned; she wants to be free to live her life the way she did before the attack on Pearl Harbor. In fact, the first line in the song, "Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above, Don't fence me in" (Porter n. pag.), shows these exact feelings. She wants to be able to go wherever she wants and be free to do what she pleases; she does not want to be restricted by the authorities and their fences.

The second line of the song, “Let me ride through the wide open country that I love, Don’t fence me in” (Porter n. pag.), deals with her affection to America and how she believes that they, the Japanese Americans, were almost a part of the society before the war. She believes her country to be accepting since her family is part of the community where there are many non-Japanese Americans. However, since the attack on Pearl Harbor, she has noticed the racism and the restrictions there are for her and her family. She realizes that they are no longer seen as equals and by having this song as her favourite, she states that she wants her freedom back and that she wants her free country back.

Through the song’s final lines the girl reveals her true desire and her feelings about the evacuation: “And I can’t look at hovels and I can’t stand fences; Don’t fence me in, no; Pop, oh don’t you fence me in” (Porter n. pag.). She wants to protest against the treatment of the Japanese Americans and her family and appeals through the song to the authorities not to evacuate them. She is also asking the Americans not to control them, that is, not to tell them what they are and are not allowed to do. She is tired of the racism and how the resentment towards Japanese Americans has made them change their everyday life. Not only is her father taken away, but their mother is also forced to burn whatever they have from Japan and they are no longer sent to school with rice balls for lunch (Otsuka 75). They have to change to fit the demands of the authorities, and the girl is tired of being controlled.

The boy’s feelings towards the internment camps and how he longs to be free is portrayed in the novel by his favourite animal, that is, the wild horse. The fact that he keeps asking his sister whether they are going to see any on the train ride demonstrates his longing for what they represent. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “wild” stands for “[a]cting or moving freely without restraint” and “going at one’s own will” (“wild” II. 6). His sister remembers also that the horses are just “roaming around” (Otsuka 29) on the hills and the desert plains. They are free to do what they want and the boy wants the same freedom. Even though the novel never says that he has noticed the racism, perhaps he is too young at the time, he has noticed the restraints. He is, for instance, sent to school with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch instead of rice balls. He is also, if anyone asks, Chinese, as his mother asked him to say to people (Otsuka 75). These things become nonetheless a part of their life. The boy realizes the restrictions more clearly when the family is staying at the racetrack before being moved to the internment camp. Being restricted, and not being able to go where he pleases, is when his fascination for the horses begins.

When he is finally able to see the wild horses from the train window he “lets out a low moan” (Otsuka 45-46). The moan is not a cry of pain but a longing to join the mustangs. He

wishes to be as free as they are, and to be able to go where he pleases, just as they are. The boy's freedom is, at the racetrack, very limited and he is not allowed to leave it. His freedom continues to be limited on the train ride, because they are not permitted to leave the train or to have the curtains up whenever they want. The wild horses remind him of the freedom he once had before the war and they represent the hope of getting his freedom back. He knows that the internment is just temporary and that they will be set free as soon as the war ends. He therefore finds comfort in seeing the horses run freely, because they keep his hope up of getting his life back as it once was. In fact, he finds so much comfort that he dreams about them for three nights in a row (Otsuka 89).

However, his hope of regaining his freedom is shattered when he at camp asks his sister where the horsemeat comes from. The girl, who is tired of being restrained and tired of the dust, tells him that some of it comes from the racetrack, but that most of it comes from the wild mustangs; the same ones as they had seen from the train. She says that, "[t]hey round them up in the desert [...] and then they shoot them" (Otsuka 89). The boy never comments on her answer but, through his silence, it becomes clear that he is disturbed by what she says. Surrounding the horses before they kill them means that they first take away their freedom, and then make sure that they will never get it back. His family, as well as all the Japanese Americans, have lost their freedom and the boy loses his hopes of ever being free again.

The horse occurs in his dream not only as wild and in a herd, but also as separate and in the specific colour white. When he is on the train he dreams that he is riding "a white horse by the sea" (Otsuka 53), where the horse yet again symbolizes freedom. This symbol reveals however, also other feelings that the boy is having. The fact that the horse is white represents the joy the boy feels riding him. The "sea", on the other hand, has in literature symbolized "chaos" and is alien and dangerous (Ferber 179). Here it represents the chaotic situation the boy and his family are in, seen from the boy's perspective. Before Pearl Harbor, the boy was happy with his life and even if he is not as happy as earlier, he still feels joy prior to the evacuation. The time between the attack and the evacuation is like the fine line where land turns to sea. With this dream the boy is revealing his fear of the alien place he is going to, and because the horse cannot go with him on the sea, the boy realizes that he has lost his freedom the minute he leaves his home.

In the same dream the boy reveals another feeling of hope, namely through the symbol, "white sails". While he is standing by the sea, he sees three ships nearing; ships sent by the Emperor to rescue him; "[t]heir sails were white and square and filled with wind" (Otsuka 53). Since the sails are "filled with wind" it seems as if there is a strong wind that blows them

to the shore. According to Ferber, “strong winds” are a representation for “passionate and tumultuous emotion” (236). In addition to this, the fact that the boy knows in his dream that he is being rescued demonstrates his strong feeling of regaining his freedom. He knows in his heart that the internment is only provisional and that he will go back to live his life like it was.

The next time white sails appear in the novel are during winter time at the camp, when the boy sees the frozen sheets hanging on the laundry lines. He thinks to himself how they are, “*frozen white sails*” (Otsuka 88) and shows with this thought that he keeps his hopes up of being rescued and of regaining his freedom. But he also knows that, since the sails are frozen, the release will not happen quite yet. He feels that when they left their house they pressed the pause-button and that their life will start again as soon as they come back. He believes that everything will be just as normal as before; he will play with his friends at their houses and his dad will continue to sing silly songs. Just as the sails are frozen so is the time at the camp.

Expressing hope through an object is something the mother does as well when she mentions how she has lost her pearl earring on the train. Not uttering what she feels about the earring until after some time has passed in camp reveals her thoughts on how she has started losing hope of regaining her previous life. She mentions how she has not “felt right ever since” (Otsuka 86) and demonstrates through her affection for the earring how she feels different since the evacuation, and how the train ride makes her realize just that.

The pearl in literature is a symbol for “beauty”, “rarity” and “great price” (Ferber 151). In the novel it represents the mother’s life prior to Pearl Harbor when she and her family lives in their stucco house in Berkeley. By using a pearl earring as a symbol for this, the narrator shows how the mother views that life as something beautiful and invaluable. The family are at this period of time happy and feel like they are a part of the society. Her husband is employed at a successful company, she is working around the house and her children are both good students and are playing with other non-Japanese American children.

During the conversation about the earring, she says, “I wonder where it went” (Otsuka 86). Wondering about where the earring is shows that she does not understand how her life has become so different and that this is something she could not have ever imagined. Her life changes in a moment, unexpectedly and without warning. It seems as if she right then realizes what has happened and by not knowing where it is she finally says, “it’s just gone. Sometimes things disappear and there’s no getting them back” (Otsuka 86). Here she demonstrates not only that she has accepted that the previous life is gone, but also that she does not longer believe being able to continue her life where she left it. She has simply lost the hope of returning to what she once had.

It is not only the girl who shows signs of not feeling good enough for the non-Japanese Americans, the mother does too. When she is thinking about the life she had before Pearl Harbor, she finishes her thoughts by saying, “I had no business wearing those earrings in the first place” (Otsuka 86). With this utterance she reveals how the racism towards her, and the Japanese Americans, has caught up with her and how it makes her feel inferior. The hard life at the camp makes her believe that she does not really deserve the life she once had, where they lived almost as equals with the non-Japanese Americans.

The final symbols this essay will discuss deal with the children’s attitude towards the homecoming and their future. When the family returns home it is autumn, the season of “incipient decay” (“autumn” 2). The season reveals the difficult time they have in front of them and the family finds their house in an entirely different state than they left it in; most of their furniture is missing, the walls are stained (Otsuka 111) and even the rose bush from the front yard has vanished (Otsuka 106). Despite the poor state of the house the children still hope that everything will go back to normal: “[w]e could pick up our lives where we had left off and go on” (Otsuka 114). They hope for a better future and the rose bush becomes a symbol for that quest.

In literature, the “rose” symbolizes “the most beautiful” and “the most beloved” (Ferber 173). Both children are fond of the rose bush their mother once planted in front of their house, which is especially shown in May when the roses in the neighbours’ gardens start blooming and the siblings start searching for it. Even though their search is unsuccessful they never stop “believing that somewhere out there, in some stranger’s garden, [their] mother’s rosebush [is] blossoming madly” (Otsuka 139).

The rose bush represents the life the family have before the attack on Pearl Harbor; the life when they live as a family, in peace and happiness. The children’s affection with the rose bush shows their longing for that life and they believe that their wish will come true if they find it. Before they leave for the internment camp, they have many friends and the family is accepted in the community. However, on their return, several of their previous friends and neighbours will not speak to them anymore. In addition to this, the family is having difficulties in knowing who to trust, since they do not know what the non-Japanese Americans feel about them.

They have, according to Ali, lost “more than can be seen” (n. pag.) and the rose bush is a symbol of that. Not only have they lost their friends and neighbours, their house and furniture, but they have also lost a part of themselves. The children are too frightened of what people might accuse them of, which is the reason why they start to avoid drawing attention to

themselves. They speak softly, they do not raise their hands in school and they follow the rules (Otsuka 122). However, as time goes by, and autumn turns to spring so does the people around them start accepting them. It is the season of “love” (Ferber 200) and they start feeling more and more at home. Sometimes, for a brief moment, they even forget that they have ever been away. But no matter what they do, they cannot erase the internment from their memory and they cannot return to the life they once had.

Even though the children stop searching for the rose bush, they do not stop believing that it is blossoming somewhere. In the season of “youth” and “love” (Ferber 200-201), they start a new life with a more compassionate approach. By imagining the thriving rose bush somewhere they show their belief that they, one day, will regain their trust in non-Japanese Americans despite the racism and the adversities with the house. They trust that they will once again be a part of the society and that they will have friends in the community, because it is during the spring new lives begin.

The symbols play an important role in understanding the novel and the characters, since no emotions are being literally described. The narrator chooses to show the characters’ feelings instead of describing them, as Ali argues. So, in order to understand the fictional family’s emotions, one has to interpret the meaning of the symbols. The specific meanings are dependent on the context the symbols appear in. By understanding the symbols the reader can then relate to the characters and their lives. The presented symbols in this essay also help the reader comprehend the situation the Japanese Americans endured during the Second World War and may perhaps add an understanding to other historical events that can be applied to this novel. It is only by knowing history and by understanding what impact it has on people, even though they are, in this case, fictional characters that we can prevent similar events to occur again.

A possible topic for further research is an analysis of other symbols not discussed in this essay, for instance the recurring ones: rain, wind and dust, as well as other like trees and the father becoming bald. As stated earlier in the essay, the events in the novel can be compared to other historical incidents, like the treatment of Arabs and Muslims after the attack on September 11th 2001, which this essay has not discussed further. Another topic for additional research can, therefore, be to compare the symbols in this novel with real events regarding the terrorist attack, to find specific meanings that have to do with the general treatment of the Arabs and Muslims, instead of individual fictional characters.

Since the critique on the novel has been limited, this essay contributes to the narrow discussion about the use of symbols in it. Presenting selected symbols and discussing them in

order to explain their specific meaning within the context they appear in have added more to that discussion.

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