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Extended meaning by symbolism

When the Emperor Was Divine

by Julie Otsuka

The full meaning of symbols in literature is not always immediately apparent to readers; this is certainly the case with Julie Otsuka's novel *When the Emperor Was Divine*. This essay argues that although the deeper significance of symbols is not always obvious in Otsuka's novel the symbols, when analysed in detail, add new and important dimensions of meaning to the tragic story of the interned family. Even though it has been claimed by Duncanson¹ that "[a] good symbol is simple rather than complex" (Duncanson V), this essay demonstrates that a "good" symbol can indeed be complex. Symbols that at a first glance seem obvious, such as flowers, dust, colours and horses, when viewed from a "relational community" (Gusfield xvi) perspective, i.e. in terms of human relationships, add new and significant levels of meaning to Otsuka's novel. Gusfield defines an element in a community as "consciousness of kind" which is the shared intrinsic connection felt among community members (Gusfield 34). When taking into consideration the geographical and temporal setting in which the symbols occur, combined with how the symbols represent and enhance the quality of human relationships, this essay demonstrates how Otsuka's novel describes in a particularly powerful and touching way the tragic consequences, of suddenly finding oneself homeless and unwanted. What happens to the family described in Otsuka's novel is in fact what happened to many Japanese Americans at the outbreak of World War II.

This essay focuses on universal symbols that also are known as archetypes, i.e. "a plot or character element that recurs in cultural or cross-cultural" (Duckart n.pag.) contexts. Universal symbols embody potential mutual feelings and ideas the author and reader share (Duckart n.pag.). However, in Otsuka's novel there are universal symbols that in certain contexts change into becoming personal symbols, which is demonstrated where relevant. Personal symbols or private symbols "may only be discernable in the context of one specific story or poem" (Wheeler n.pag.). Horses used as a symbol in the novel are an example of a personal symbol; the meaning of the horses changes in the specific context, which is demonstrated below. The most recurrent symbols in the novel are categorized in the cardinal contexts of nature, colours and animals.

Furthermore, in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, yet another novel dealing with the internment of the Japanese American population, symbolism plays an important role. In her analysis of *Obasan* the literary critic Rao claims that the landscape functions as a symbol that signifies the

¹ Even though Duncanson's review is on the human factors literature on visual and auditory symbols to create a standard set of symbols for use in Airway Facilities, his definition of a "good" symbol is applicable also in this context.

problems of national and personal identity when the Japanese Canadians were forced into internal exile during World War II (Rao n.pag.). The following section on nature demonstrates how the latter is a complex symbol in Otsuka's novel as well. Comparisons are also made to Kogawa's novel.

Nature plays an important symbolic role in Otsuka's novel. The primary nature symbols used are dust, flowers and the weather and seasons. Nature is depicted as a border and in a complex way broadens the narrator's story, which is demonstrated below. Dust is by size the smallest of the three subcategories, but in spite of its small size dust affects the family profoundly. The definition of dust, "a small grain, generally less than a few hundred micrometres in size and composed of silicate minerals and glassy nodules" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*) shows how small the parts of dust in fact are. The fact that dust consists of very small, barely visible grains but has an immense impact on the family will be demonstrated below.

The sentences "[a]ll that he [the son] could see was dust." (Otsuka 77) and "[a] dust storm would blow for hours, and sometimes even days, and then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it would stop, and for a few seconds the world was perfectly silent" (Otsuka 77) demonstrating that the dust, even though it consists of hardly visible parts, influenced the family's situation in a significant way. The narrator underlines how threatening the dust is, since the world became silent when the dust storm stopped, even if it was just for a few seconds. The lines give a notion how incredibly extensive a dust storm really is. Not only is there dust absolutely everywhere, the sound of the dust storm is nearly deafening. The narrator reinforces the latter by describing the family's longing for the storm to end and relief when it ceases, even for merely a few moments. How incredibly hard and close it is to hopelessness not being able to avoid the dust as not being able to avoid the incarceration is demonstrated below. Dust as a symbol gains special significance when the geographical location is taken into consideration; in a desert, the amount of sand is incalculable and beyond the understanding of the human mind.

Further, humans according to *The Bible* were once formed by God from dust (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, Genesis 2:7*). Dust became a symbol of man's frailty, "[f]or he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust" (*Psalms 103:14*) and of mankind's mortality, "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (*Genesis 3:19*). The narrator reinforces the fact that dust symbolizes frailty and mortality when describing the son's act to write his name in the dust and what remains after only a night: "[o]ne evening, before he went

to bed, he wrote his name in the dust across the top of the table. All through the night, while he slept, more dust blew through the walls. By morning his name was gone” (Otsuka 64).

When the boy realizes that nature has erased his name he feels frail; a person without a name lacks value. The boy’s relation to other people is vital in this context in terms of understanding the symbol of dust; a human being with no identification feels less worthy, which is very much the case for the boy without a name. And once again, the geographical location of the desert is significant; in the desert there is nothing but sand, which enhances the boy’s feeling of loneliness. The dust also emphasizes the boy’s feeling of frailty, bearing in mind the Biblical interpretation that dust is our origin as human beings and also how we all will end up; as dust. That the boy sees the dust as an evil enemy and ultimately a threat to the family’s entire existence is confirmed in the lines “[y]ellow dust devils whirled across the sand” (Otsuka 103). The narrator once again uses dust to demonstrate the threatening and devastating world surrounding the interned family. The ultimate threat against them in shape of the devil is also used by the narrator. Furthermore, the dust even destroys the family clock, which stops working since its gears are clotted with dust (Otsuka 103). Yet again, the narrator presents dust as a negative symbol; it causes the family to lose track of time, an essential part of organized existence.

Likewise, small parts of dust affect the family’s situation negatively, threatening to destroy and symbolically convert them into dust in a negative cycle of events. Returning to the Biblical interpretation, dust was one of the ten plagues that Egypt suffered from. The dust of the earth turned into gnats, which infested the Egyptians, but not the Israelites (*Exodus 8:17*). It is symbolically possible to link Japanese Americans to the plagued Egyptians, and the Caucasians to the Israelites; the latter being spared the severe inconveniences in deep contrast to what the group of people living parallel to them have to endure. The dust represents threats against the family’s existence, and furthermore dust is described as impossible to avoid. The boy claims that the dust even penetrated his dreams (Otsuka 64), i.e. there is not the slightest possibility of getting away from the impendent dust, physically or mentally. Once again the universal symbol has turned personal, since the representation of dust is strongly influenced by the boy’s experiences.

Moreover, dust as a symbol returns when Mother goes back to the house and she spends hours trying to scrub, dust and sweep away the layers of dirt (Otsuka 124). Once again dust is something that has soiled the family and the house where they once lived and to which they

have returned. Other people occupied their house when they had left and it becomes Mother's unceasingly effort to erase the traces of the intruders. Dust originates "from everything under the sun: minerals, seeds, pollen, insects, mold, lichens and even bacteria. Its sources also include bone, hair, hide, feather, skin, blood, and excrement" (Amato 4), which means that the dust Mother aims at removing with her scrubbing lies in deeper layers. The traces of the previous inhabitants, who not only have sullied the house with their physical but also with their mental dust and dirt lie in different layers. The layers of dust Mother aims at removing also represent the attitudes the family painfully have to face after returning, i.e. the mental dust, and is at the same time an example of how the characters' relations impact on the dust symbol. It is the people that have lived in their house when they were away who create the attitudes of mental dust and dirt mentioned above which Mother so desperately tries to erase.

Another symbol of nature which plays a momentous role in Otsuka's novel are flowers. The narcissus in the following extract plays an important role, as the analysis below will show. The narrator states that the narcissus in the garden are white (Otsuka 10). The colour white as a symbol is discussed further below. The colour of the flowers is designated when Mother is in the garden. Mother is on her way to execute the dog, since no pets are allowed at the relocation centres (Otsuka 10). Thompson states that people in Japan, in general, prefer flowers that drop their petals one by one, rather than fall off in one clump. That is why the rose is not popular, and even considered bad luck. Something with many petals can also be related to many years of life which is another "good fortune" wish (Thompson n.pag.). A narcissus therefore fits very elegantly into the story, since it in fact has many petals, which drop one at the time.

The narcissus takes its name from Greek mythology, when a man called Narcissus fell in love with his own reflected picture, and turned into the flower that bears his name. In fact, in both Greek and Egyptian mythology, the narcissus represents death. It is a representation of universal and temporal symbols, since it has been portrayed by previous authors; the theme of youth rapidly turning into death with the narcissus is for instance conveyed in Robert Herrick's famous poem *To Daffodils*². The Latin name for daffodils is *Daffodil Narcissus*

² For further reading on this poem and the life and work of Robert Herrick, see <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176773>> [Retrieved November 9, 2013] and Quiller-Couch, Arthur Thomas, Sir. *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1919, [c1901]; Bartleby.com, 1999 <www.bartleby.com/101/> [Retrieved November 9, 2013].

Amaryllidaceae (Nesbitt 267), which means that daffodils and narcissus belong to the same family of flowers. Herrick (1591–1674) uses his knowledge of Greek mythology to connect spring, when narcissuses come to life, to human youth. Herrick, like Greek and Egyptian mythology, also associates the death of the narcissus in autumn and winter to human life being short and soon forgotten. In Otsuka's novel the latter symbolizes Mother's fear of not knowing what the future holds. In this context, the narcissus also signifies personal relationship as it works as a personal sign for Mother. She lives at a very uncertain time, and her husband has been arrested four months earlier. The narcissus demonstrates Mother's fate going to the internment camp; going from a secure and free life to incarceration and uncertainty. The future does not look bright to anyone who understands what the narcissus symbolizes. That previous authors, like Herrick, have used the narcissus demonstrates that the flower is a temporal symbol, since it has been used over time in different contexts but the significance, as demonstrated above, changes over time.

Narcissus and daffodils are not the only flowers represented in the novel. A neighbouring girl named Elizabeth Roosevelt, who used to live on the other side of the fence, keeps sending the boy letters with enclosed gifts (Otsuka 68) and in one of the letters she sends him "[a] tulip bulb which he [...] named Gloria" (Otsuka 69). A tulip³ bulb bursts into life in early spring, and spring is a conventional symbol for what is asleep in winter awakens in spring. Like Herrick, the narrator lets the flower represent how spring is a symbol for a new beginning. The tulip bulb represents the hope of a better situation for the boy and his family and that their present life in the camp will be changed into a better and freer one outside the camp. A bulb is a small but significant sign of a small improvement, bringing the family hope. Since the tulip bulb is given to the boy by a former neighbouring girl, the relationship between the girl and the boy affects the reader's interpretation of the symbol; the characters' relations indeed influence the meaning of the complex symbol.

The fence referred to was between the boy and the girl when they were neighbours, and when the boy is in camp there is another kind of fence between them. That way the narrator demonstrates that there always has always been a fence between them, i.e. they did not live in the same worlds even when they were neighbours; the full meaning of the symbol of the fence

³ There is an article on how plants, among them also tulips, travelled the world described from an imperial point of view written by William Beinart and Karen Middleton, *Plant Transfers in Historical Perspective: A Review Article*. *Environment and History* 10, no. 1 (Feb., 2004): 3–29 in which the authors claim how European colonizers brought seeds and plants following in the steps of the colonization and how the colonization has influenced the world's fauna.

is thus dependent on both its geographical and temporal location: geographically, because it symbolizes a border between them, and temporally, since a fence is present both when the two were neighbours and when the boy is interned.

The fence represents not only the physical boundary but more importantly the mental division between them. They are not equals and have never been, even though Elizabeth is an exception, since she is the only friend from before to keep in contact with the boy. The name given to the tulip bulb by the boy derives from the word glory, which means “great splendor; heavenly bliss” (*Webster’s New Dictionary and Thesaurus* 241). In this context, the tulip bulb represents a small string of hope in form of the Caucasian girl on the other side of the fence. The bulb and its name show that not all Caucasians are all through evil, which is an important message for the boy to acknowledge.

Furthermore, a flower that simultaneously and contradictory represents hope and sorrow appears when a man in the camp is shot to death. A friend of the deceased “had noticed a rare and unusual flower on the other side of the fence. It was his belief that his friend had been reaching out to pick the flower when the shot had been fired” (Otsuka 101). For the man who was killed, the flower represents longing for freedom, since it grew across the fence, which keeps the man away from the rest of the world. The flower is thereby a personal symbol to the man who was shot to death. The tragic death also demonstrates how such an innocent action as only wanting to pick a flower could turn into an action with a mortal outcome. The narrator does not tell which species the flower is, which means that it is of subsidiary significance. It is of greater signification that the flower, without species identification, represents freedom and the desire for freedom. Thereby the flower represents a symbol that depends on its location just on the other side of the fence. Furthermore, it is symbolic to find a flower in the desert, where normally flowers do not grow. The flower is also dependent on its temporal location since the internment of Japanese Americans occurred during the Second World War.

Additionally, this essay claims that the tulip bulb represents spring as a symbol for coming to life, which contrasts to winter when nature lies to rest. Seasons and the weather are symbolically used by the narrator, and spring is a recurring theme: “The first signs of spring: mild days, buds in the fruit trees, no more long lists of the dead” (Otsuka 137). The narrator uses the description of springtime 1946 as a symbol for life slowly coming back after the cold months (actually years in incarceration). In contrast to the winter in the camp away from the freedom where it is so cold that “[s]mall birds [lose] their way and [drop] out of the sky.

Hungry coyotes [creep] beneath the barbed-wire fence and [fight] with the stray dogs for scraps of food” (Otsuka 88). Winter and coldness reinforce the enforced state of sadness from being incarcerated. The conditions for the family are incredibly poor, and the weather conditions mirror the state they are in. The theme of birds as symbols is discussed further below.

With winter come clouds which darken their skies, and the boy sees dark shadows of clouds floating across the sand (Otsuka 100). Clouds play an important role “in Christian symbolism [where] clouds represent the unseen God, veiling the sky and also veiling God “(Fraim n.pag.). The clouds the boy sees demonstrate the problems he faces in the camp. The clouds not only shadow him personally but also his future. The clouds tell him about a darkened future, and the theme of dark and colours is dealt with in the paragraphs below.

The final symbol of nature to be discussed is nature as a border. In both Otsuka’s novel as in *Obasan* (Kogawa) mountains are used as a geographical symbol for borders, which makes the representation into a geographical symbol of importance. In *Obasan* “single families are moved to places east of the Rocky Mountains. The scattering of communities was an actual policy” (Falkenhayner 18). The Japanese American families in Otsuka’s novel are brought to the Central Utah Relocation Centre⁴ on the other side of the mountains seen from a Californian perspective. On the other side of the mountains, in both novels, there is nothing but desert. “The mountains were farther away than they seemed. Everything was, in the desert. Everything except water” (Otsuka 58). These three sentences emblemize the life in the internment camp; the incarcerated watch the distant mountains bordering them from their previous and normal life. The absence of water demonstrates the lack of qualification for life. Water is absolutely essential for the survival of plants and humans. The narrator highlights how everything instead is desert being dry, sandy and hot, where very little can survive, a deep contrast to their previous life. Thus the family’s life is severely restricted, not only being interned but also having to struggle against nature in form of the desert to survive.

Equally important, the boy watches the mountains far away, and dreams of what is on the other side: “The nearest town over was Delta. In Delta, she [his sister] said, you could buy oranges.” (Otsuka 58), which demonstrates the children’s and adults’ yearning for a life like the life they had before across the mountains. The geographical location affects the meaning

⁴ There are lots of facts to be found on the Central Utah Relocation Centre, which later changed name into Topaz because its name was too long for postal errands. <<http://www.topazmuseum.org/facts>> [December 1, 2013]

of the symbol: if they had not been in the middle of the desert but at home they would not have reflected on the mountains, and what is on the other side of them. They wish for a normal life where one could visit the local grocery store to buy food without restrictions. The mountains become a symbolic image for the change they have been submitted to; life would be much better if they just were on the other side. Even the school is named after the mountains, Mount View Elementary (Otsuka 71), which is a name given by the authorities, to underline the fact that the incarcerated are allowed to view the mountains but not live on the other side of them. Thereby the narrator reinforces the theme of longing for freedom represented by the mountains.

In Japanese culture, as in many other cultures, colours are important message carriers. Otsuka's novel is not an exception and there are recurring colour themes. The colour white is the colour most frequently used by the narrator. In Japanese culture white generally stands for "purity and truth" (Thompson n.pag.), which accords well to the novel. An example of white being a universal symbol for peace emerged in Britain in the early 1930s when the white poppy arose as a symbol for peace without violence (Peace Pledge Union n.pag.). The colour white signifies purity and innocence, which is why white is one of the colours of the American flag (U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong & Macau n.pag.). The definition fits perfectly to how Mother, in contrast to the family's situation being innocently incarcerated, describes an ideal house they pass when being transferred by train: "it [the train] passed a lone white house with a lawn" (Otsuka 23). This example of the symbol white represents how the characters' relations affect the interpretation of the symbol; the family in the novel are trapped on a train and the unknown, presumably Caucasians, live in a free world in a white house. When the daughter wakes up from the sound of breaking glass on the train she tells that she dreamt she was in her bedroom in the white stucco house back home (Otsuka 43). In this context the symbol white depends on geographical location; "back home" places the colour white into a geographical context. The white house represents freedom and safety for the family. The daughter's dream confirms her longing for the unproblematic times they once had. The latter underlines that white represents her freedom and how she and her mother already on the train miss their past life.

Similarly the boy dreams of freedom and peace when he dreams of white horses by the sea (Otsuka 53) and that the Emperor has sent ships to rescue him, and that their sails were white (53). The boy continues to dream and when he dreams about his beloved father, his father is

“riding a big beautiful horse named White Frost” (Otsuka 83). A biblical usage of the colour white in association with a horse is found in: “[t]hen I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war” (*Revelation 19:11*). The narrator reinforces the family’s longing for a faithful and true judging, which means freedom in terms of not being forced to incarceration.

The narrator clearly chooses the colour white to indicate a longing for peace and thereby freedom, which is demonstrated by the examples above. White is also used for another description of their house back in Berkeley “back in December, right after Pearl Harbor, when they were still living in the white house” (Otsuka 74). In this example of white there are two complex meanings. Firstly, white once again represents the family’s longing for the life with freedom they had before the events at Pearl Harbour. Secondly, “the white house” (Otsuka 74) hints towards the White House in Washington. The White House is a universal symbol for power and freedom, attributes the family had access to before. The family’s own “white house” (Otsuka 74) is for the family their space of freedom, their kingdom so to speak, which they seem to have lost while in the internment camp.

However, the colour white is in Japanese culture also considered to be the colour of death and mourning. As in many cultures, it is common to use white flowers at funerals in Japan still today. When mother passes the white narcissus (10) the flowers symbolize her mourning of the tragic and inescapable situation she is in. The white flowers further imply the inevitable fate which lies ahead of her and her family. That white means purity and freedom is confirmed by the fact that the family dog’s name is merely White Dog (Otsuka 10). The importance of animals used as symbols is discussed further below. What can be mentioned here though is that dogs are considered in many cultures to be man’s best friend. The dog is more or less nameless, only given a name from its appearance. The latter connects with how the Japanese Americans are judged on their looks: “black hair, yellow skin, slanted eyes. The cruel face of the enemy” (Otsuka 120) and further demonstrated in the statements on what kind of “ese” they are, Japanese or Chinese (Otsuka 120). The American magazine *Life* in 1941 published an article on the subject how to differ Japanese Americans from Chinese Americans (*Life Magazine* 81-82); thus the Japanese Americans in general and the family in the novel in particular are judged by their appearances only just like the family do to the dog.

Mother tells the dog just before executing it that it has been a good white dog (Otsuka 11). At this point it is an end of a contract, where Mother thanks the dog for the time that has been,

which until now has been good. Furthermore it indicates the situation is about to change dramatically, since Mother decides to put the dog to death. White Dog has until now been a fine companion, just like white people have been predominantly good companions to Mother and her family, at least until now. The white dog's life represents how Japanese Americans and Caucasians until now have lived parallel together. However, that is just like the relationship with the dog, about to come to an abrupt closure. Since the dog is white it additionally means that the dog is, according to the definition of the colour white by Thompson, a token of purity and truth (Thompson n.pag.). Like the Japanese Americans the white dog until the end has been loyal and faithful. Neither of them was rewarded very well; Japanese Americans were incarcerated and the white dog was executed. After having put the white dog down Mother buried the dog in the garden (Otsuka 11), which demonstrates how Mother buried not only the dog but also the former relationships with Caucasians. In anger and disappointment she disposes the former relationships her family have had with white people. She leaves the white dog and the relationships behind her when she is forced to face a new reality when being relocated.

In deep contrast to white the narrator also uses dark as a symbol. When Joe Lundy, the owner of the local hardware store, does not allow Mother to pay he wipes the side of the register with a rag, trying to remove a dark stain that would not go away (Otsuka 5). From a "relational community" (Gusfield xvi) point of view, the dark stain represents Joe's view of the current problematic situation for Mother and her fellow Japanese Americans; that the stain has dirtied and sullied the United States. Joe is a representation of the thought that not all Caucasians are behind the harsh treatment forced on the Japanese Americans. According to how Becker defines darkness as "primeval chaos and death" (Becker 41), darkness and black are universal symbols for evil and darker times. The battle between good and evil is a theme throughout the novel, and is reinforced by the contrasts between the colour white and the dark stain as stated above.

Additionally, the dark stain has also been used by latter writers to enlighten the issue of a similar internment; Guantanamo. In the article *The Dark Stain of Guantanamo* (Sweig n.pag.) the very same symbol is used to illustrate how yet another incarceration darkens the American history. The statement reinforces Otsuka's choice of the temporal symbol of the darkened stain on Joe Lundy's counter. Joe Lundy is presented to be a character who disagrees with the decision made by the government. His effort to erase the dark stain shows that not all

Caucasian Americans are behind the decision to put Japanese Americans in camps. The stain is therefore a temporal representation, which is used in two different contexts describing two incarcerations in two different temporal settings; in Otsuka's novel and as well in Sweig's article.

As mentioned earlier when discussing symbols of nature the boy "saw the dark shadows of the clouds" (Otsuka 100). That the clouds are dark indicate that his prospects do not look good, since dark traditionally is used to describe something negative. The same phenomenon occurs to the girl on the train to the relocation camp when the last shade went down and made the darkness complete (Otsuka 28). To be absolutely surrounded by darkness where one cannot even figure out who or what is behind, in front or beside oneself is a terrifying experience, and figuratively the family now stumble in the dark, not knowing what will happen to them. The change of life into the unknown is symbolized by the darkness around them on the train. Darkness is also a Biblical symbol for mourning and grief (*Jeremiah 8:21*). The children demonstrate the contrast to darkness and their mourning of their previous life when dreaming about the white horses and ships with white sails which come to rescue them (Otsuka 53), as discussed previously.

The importance of the white dog (Otsuka 10-11) discussed above is only one of the recurring animal symbols within the novel. The narrator also includes birds and horses. While the Mother kills the dog but she lets the bird go free: "[c]ome on out, she [the mother] said. The bird stepped cautiously onto her hand and looked at her [...] She opened the window and set the bird out" (Otsuka 19). The narrator's use of the word "cautiously" in the context demonstrates that the bird is afraid and uncertain of what to expect next. The unknown future is intimidating for the bird, which is forced to leave its secure cage. A similar feeling of insecurity is felt by the family when they are forced to leave their home, which has always been a safe haven. Birds as a symbol for man's soul have been used in literature prior to the novel. In Taoism, it is significant that "immortals [are] thought to be in form of birds [and] there [is] a common notion that the soul [leaves] one's physical body as a bird after death" (Becker 41). In addition, it can be noted that James states in an analysis of Yeats's writings, that a bird is an "appropriate symbol for the disembodied soul" (James 117), which demonstrates the bird to be a universal symbol. The reason for Mother releasing the bird is that she is about to be transformed; she lets her soul free. Mother gives the bird the opportunity for a new life; for Mother there is no such opportunity.

Furthermore, Mother's action corresponds with Japanese behaviour and "the virtue of resignation and serenity" (Lebra 6) and releasing the bird demonstrates that she accepts her fate. The mother is very efficient in planning her family's evacuation, including how she decides to kill the family pet. Her strength and independence symbolize conventional Japanese behaviour at the time: "Japanese culture places emphasis upon achievement and striving for success, but at the same time preaches the virtue of resignation and serenity" (Lebra 6). This type of behaviour is best understood in terms of Taoism, the major religion in Japan, which emphasises the importance of "[n]on-action [...], flexibility, [...] yielding, desirelessness, [...] simplicity, contentment" (Komjathy n.pag.). Komjathy's description of Taoism explains Mother's efficiency in her actions preparing the family's leave. She is an example of contentment and flexibility and shows distinct signs of resignation and acceptance. By telling "[s]he could not hear him [the bird] anymore" (Otsuka 20) the narrator explains that Mother has lost contact with her inner self, signifying that the bird is a symbol for Mother's soul. The soul left her at the very moment she let the bird fly away. The narrator continues: "[w]ithout the bird in the cage, the house felt empty." (Otsuka 20), just as Mother feels empty without her husband and with the knowledge that she is to be incarcerated. The bird in the cage is also a metaphor for the life the family have had; living in an incapacious world with a Caucasian majority, and not seen as equals. The theme of not being considered as equals was also discussed above in the paragraphs on nature as a symbol.

In addition, a considerably bigger bird is mentioned in a letter the boy receives from his father. The father describes how he sees a bald eagle flying towards the mountains. (Otsuka 90). The bald eagle is the national symbol of the United States since 1782 and the bald eagle is the only eagle found exclusively on the North American continent (Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries n.pag.). The narrator demonstrates that the bird flies towards the mountains, emblemizing a border as stated on page 7 and 8 that precludes access to their earlier and much happier life. The word "[b]ald" is from an obsolete English word meaning white." (Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries n.pag.). The knowledge that the bald eagles are not actually bald adds a complex symbol, in contradiction to Duncanson's definition delineated on page 1. As this essay previously stated in the paragraphs on colours the symbol white represents "purity and truth" (Thompson n.pag.) and freedom in form of peace as stated on page 8. With that in mind the white headed eagle symbolizes freedom, since a bird is considered to be free on its wings. In many religions "heavenly beings [] have

wings [...] such as angels] (Becker 41). In this context, it suggests that the bald eagle seen by the father (Otsuka 90) is an angel sent to the boy from his father with hope of better times and freedom.

Moreover, the family had lived all summer in old horse stalls behind an old racetrack (Otsuka 30) before being removed to the internment camp in the desert. According to Andrews, horses are a universal symbol for freedom (Andrews 282). Historically, horses enabled people to travel and experience a form of freedom; thus people could discover the multiplicity of life (Andrews 282). On the train journey to the camp the train passes a herd of wild mustangs (Otsuka 45). The horses are free and can move wherever they wish, unlike the people trapped on the train. The horses' freedom is being stressed by their long legs and their flying manes (Otsuka 45). When the horses "gallop[] toward the mountain [...] [t]hey are going away, he [the boy] said" (Otsuka 46) represents the family's decreasing hope and freedom. Since the mountains represent a boundary, as previously stated on page 7, it is a symbolic act when the horses run for the mountains.

The horses also symbolise another feature of the family's life. From time to time there is a smell of horse meat in the camp (Otsuka 50), and its origin is explained by the girl when reminding the boy of the wild horses they had seen from the train (Otsuka 89). The wild horses, which previously had represented freedom, come to stand for hopelessness. The wild horses have lost their freedom when they become captured and eventually eaten by the interned. That symbolizes the end not only for the horses but also of the family's hope for freedom. In addition, the changing significance of the horses demonstrates the dependence of the universal symbol on its context and relation to characters.

Subsequently, on the train the boy dreams about riding a white horse by the sea (Otsuka 53). In his dream he hopes to be rescued by ships that "[t]he Emperor himself had sent." (Otsuka 53). During World War II the Japanese Emperor Hirohito⁵ was often depicted on a white horse (Daly n.pag.). In Japan Emperor Hirohito's white horse was a propaganda tool (Daly n.pag.). The narrator uses the universal and temporal white horse symbol to reinforce the boy's hopes that the Emperor will rescue him and his family. The universal meaning of the horse as a freedom symbol (Andrews 282) is described below. The horse is also dependant on

⁵ In the article *Excerpts of Japanese Emperor Hirohito's journal revealed* (n.pag) by Associated Press in *USA Today* on September 3, 2007, until then secrets on Emperor Hirohito's thoughts on the time after the war were revealed. <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-03-09-hirohito_N.htm> [Retrieved January 2, 2014]

its temporal location, since it is placed at the time of World War II and the meaning of Emperor Hirohito's horse plays an important role. Daly states that the Emperor Hirohito's horse becoming a symbol was noticed by the Americans. Early in the war, United States Admiral William Halsey promised that one day he would ride Hirohito's white horse through the streets of Tokyo (Daly n.pag.). The horse Emperor Hirohito used to ride was called *Shirayuki*, which translated into English means *White Snow*. Ironically, the horse had actually been bought in California (Daly n.pag.). Thus the white horse represents the boy's, and the Japanese nation's, hope for something other than the horrible outcome of the war; at the same time, it displays American animosity towards Japan. In one of the boy's dreams he dreams of his father's return riding a big beautiful horse named White Frost (Otsuka 83). The resemblance of the two horses' names is striking. The narrator thereby draws parallels between the father and the Emperor. The boy sees his father as the Emperor, the one that eventually will be able to save him. Yet again it is demonstrated how the narrator uses the emblem as a temporal symbol, since it is so strongly associated here with Emperor Hirohito's white horse. The symbol of animals is the last category of symbols to be discussed here.

Further research could usefully extend the above analysis to include other forms that have not been included here due to space constrictions. One example is that of tools, including, for instance the bucket used for collecting water coming through a leaking roof (Otsuka 5). Moreover, analysing other novels dealing with the same theme as Otsuka's to expand the analysis of this essay would be an opportunity. In the paragraphs above on the mountains as a border this essay briefly compares Otsuka's novel to *Obasan* (Kogawa); this comparison could usefully be extended. It would also be possible to demonstrate how other similar novels are affected by the geographical and temporal settings of the symbols. For example, an analysis of Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic* and Otsuka's use of symbolism could advantageously be included. Since Julie Otsuka is a present author the opportunity to contact her⁶ is an option. Hence the analysis above could be expanded to an even deepened and broadened analysis using other novels with a similar theme in comparison.

As demonstrated above, when viewed from a "relational community" (Gusfield xvi) perspective, the geographical and temporal context in which the symbols occur enhances the

⁶ On December 2, 2013 three questions on symbolism, consolidated by yours truly, were sent to Caroline Bleeke, editorial assistant at Random House in New York, Ms. Otsuka's current representation. Two days later, on December 4, 2013, yours truly received a confirmation that the questions had been forwarded to Ms. Julie Otsuka. Until present there has not appeared any reply from Ms. Otsuka.

reader's understanding of the text. This is certainly true of the symbols of nature, colour and animals discussed here. Furthermore symbols have been demonstrated with examples to becoming personal, since the representation is highly influenced by the characters' experiences. The relational community aspect is considered in the paragraphs on the colour white, since white in Japanese culture generally stands for "purity and truth" (Thompson n.pag.). Thus this essay fills an information gap on symbolism analysed in context in Julie Otsuka's novel.

Until now there have been no examples of criticism that demonstrates how the consideration of the geographical and temporal setting in which the symbols in Otsuka's novel occur and affect the interpretations of the symbols. This essay demonstrates that despite Duncanson's definition to the contrary, important symbols can indeed be complex. The reader discovers new dimensions in Otsuka's novel by paying attention to the symbols and their context. It is through the symbols that the full tragedy of the Japanese American incarceration during World War II is revealed.

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