

2009

Streets of Despair and Blocks of Hope in John Okada's *No-No Boy*

Amy Gracia

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev



Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gracia, Amy (2009). Streets of Despair and Blocks of Hope in John Okada's *No-No Boy*. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 166-169.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/33

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Copyright © 2009 Amy Gracia

Streets of Despair and Blocks of Hope in John Okada's *No-No Boy*

AMY GRACIA

Amy A. Gracia is a senior majoring in Special Education and English. Her literary research was made possible through the support of the Shea Scholar Program and the guidance of her mentor, Dr. Anne Kaufman. Amy was also a presenter at the 2009 Sigma Tau Delta International Conference. After graduation from Bridgewater State College in May, she is planning to teach, write, and pursue a graduate degree.

No-No Boy by John Okada is the first novel published by an Asian American author. Okada uses a fictional character, Ichiro, to explore the emotional struggles of the young Japanese American men and women who were interned and then imprisoned by answering “no” to the two loyalty questions of whether they would fight against and renounce Japan during WWII, (hence the name “no-no boy”). It is a story of the guilt and anguish of a no-no boy as he struggles to find his identity upon returning home from prison. Similar to the Victorian’s novelist’s use of light to frame their characters’ reflections, Okada organizes the protagonist’s psychological journey to wholeness by using specific movement paths or routes that lead into his inner reflections. He defines Ichiro’s bicultural tensions through layers of contrasts that include a motif of directional schemes as an innovative literary function. Okada sets Ichiro, his protagonist, on various physical paths that introduce and develop his individual contemplations. He also utilizes specific regional topographical imagery to honestly reflect the turmoil and duality of Ichiro’s Japanese American identity struggle. Okada’s literary approach emphasizes the dichotomy of the Japanese American conflict as an intricate and winding journey with many avenues of unique social and psychological issues.

Style in painting is the same as in writing, a power over materials, whether words or colors, by which conceptions or sentiments are conveyed. --Sir Joshua Reynolds

The novel *No-No Boy* by John Okada casts a kaleidoscope of light on the difficult identity issues of a young Japanese- American living in Seattle during the aftermath of World War II. Ichiro Yamada, the protagonist, leaves an internment prison only to return home to a different form of prison, one without physical bars, but more difficult from which to break. This stronghold is within his mind. Okada orchestrates the protagonist’s journey toward wholeness by using specific movement paths or routes that lead into his inner reflections. Okada’s technique also includes utilizing specific topographical imagery to reflect the turmoil of Ichiro’s identity struggle and define the Japanese American experience post World War II. In this unique manner, the author emphasizes the avenues of mixed cultural conflict in Ichiro’s sojourn toward an uncertain future of inclusion in American society.

Okada’s framework of setting and direction directly play into the sociologic framework of his protagonist, a technique similar to some British writers. For

example, In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot uses frames of light, doorways, and windows as a functional tool to organize and reveal her characters' thought processes. (Gately, Leavens, and Woodcox 2) Similarly, Okada structures his novel by using directional motifs to frame and highlight his protagonist's emotions.

Throughout his novel, direction becomes a signal for his protagonist's meditative process. For example, in the first chapter, Ichiro gets off the bus "at Second and Main" and walks down the street thinking about the dilemma he now faces:

...he felt like an intruder in a world to which he had no claim. It was just enough that he should feel this way, for, of his own free will, he had stood before the judge and said that he would not go in the army. At the time, there was no other choice for him. (Okada 1)

Ichiro's inability to come to terms with his actions turns into a deep self-loathing. Rather than dying for his country, he opted for a sentence of living. How can he hold his head up now, when he chose of his own free will, to follow his Japanese mother's wishes rather than speak forth as a man?

Eto, an American veteran of Japanese descent, spews a hate-filled rebuke at Ichiro, "No-no boy, huh? ...Rotten bastard. Shit on you" (Okada 3). Ichiro hurries away onto Jackson Street and mulls over how he feels being back in familiar surroundings. He muses, "Everything looked older, dirtier, and shabbier" (Okada 5). It didn't take long for Ichiro to encounter the venomous hatred and bigotry of American society.

Okada frames Ichiro's next encounter while he continues toward home. He "walked past the pool parlor... and his pace quickened automatically," but he is taunted by Negroes "Jap-boy, To-ki-yo; Jap-boy" (Okada 5). Furious, Ichiro contemplates the incident and his own prejudices:

Friggin niggers, he uttered savagely to himself and, from the same place deep down inside where tolerance for the Negroes and the Jews and the Mexicans and the Chinese and the too short and too fat and too ugly abided because he was Japanese and knew what it was like.... (Okada 5, 6)

The futility of trying to fit back into either Japanese or American life begins to stack up in his mind. Disgusted by his mother's pride in him for spending two years in prison, he "strode into the bedroom" (Okada 11) and attempts to put words to the emptiness he feels:

...It was the way he felt, stripped of dignity, respect, purpose, honor, all the things which added up to schooling and marriage and family and work and happiness. (Okada 11, 12)

Upon returning home, Ichiro struggles with his mother's powerful influence. Typical of some Japanese immigrants who came from ultranationalist Japanese backgrounds (Earhart 72), she held Japan and the Emperor in the place of God, superior to her husband and children. She demanded the same loyalty from her firstborn son. As an American, Ichiro is confused and enraged by her insistent stance yet when she wants him to go with her, he "stumbled in blind fury after the woman who was only a rock of hate and fanatic stubbornness and was, therefore, neither woman nor mother" (Okada 21). Okada illustrates their symbolic positions, still using directional action in his text. At her insistence:

They walked through the night and the city, a mother and son thrown together for a while longer because the family group is a stubborn one and does not easily disintegrate. The woman walked ahead and the son followed and no word passed between them. (Okada 21)

When his mother traps him in an uncomfortable situation with her Japanese friends, Okada melds direction with emotion as he shows Ichiro's conflicted feelings. He "...wanted to get up and dash out into the night." (Okada 23) After their visit, he "hurried down the stairs" and "paced relentlessly" (Okada 23). The language shows Ichiro's frenzy to separate himself from that part of his Japanese past. Even though he is angry with her tight control over his life, he continues to feel trapped and confused by his loyalty.

In another instance where Ichiro is shamed and angry with his mother, he reacts, screaming through his tears, "She's crazy. Mean and crazy. Goddamned Jap!" (Okada 30) Then, "...he hurried out of the house which could never be his own" (Okada 31). He sees his mother walking in the distance "from the illumination of the streetlights and did not attempt to catch her" (Okada 31). When he sees her clearly, illuminated, but doesn't try to catch up with her, Okada shows Ichiro distancing himself from her through movement and spatial themes.

Later, when Ichiro worries that the stigma of prison has cost him his birthright, he thinks in directional metaphors. "Was it possible that he, striding freely down the street of an American city, the city of his birth and schooling and the cradle of his hopes and dreams, had waved it all aside beyond recall. ...is there no hope of redemption?" (Okada 51)

Okada ties direction to the collective identity struggle when Ichiro and his friend Kenji, a veteran, head past Jackson Street onto King Street. “They walked down the ugly streets with the ugly buildings among the ugly people which was part of America and, at the same time, would never be wholly America” (Okada 71).

Ichiro continues to grapple with the loneliness of being a “no-no boy” and recognizes that he has failed the country he loves and lost his place in the community through his actions. Subjected first to the deliberate isolation of the relocation centers (Marquis 15), and then the further segregation of prison, Ichiro is resentful and at the same time fears he will never be accepted. Okada shows the reader the complexity of the “no-no boy” through the ups and downs of Ichiro’s thought patterns. For example, Ichiro thinks about his situation and becomes incensed at the injustice of being an American citizen, yet denied his rights. “As he walked up one hill and down another, not caring where and only knowing that he did not want to go home...” He ruminates on his legal plight paralleling the American setting with the German setting:

What had happened to him and the others who faced the judge and said: You can’t make me go in the army because I’m not an American or you wouldn’t have plucked me and mine from a life that was good and real and meaningful and fenced me in the desert like they do the Jews in Germany and it is a puzzle why you haven’t started to liquidate us though you might as well since everything else has been destroyed (Okada 31).

Okada’s protagonist uniquely communicates the deep hurt of the Nisei, the first generation Japanese Americans who adopted a new culture, became immersed in the American dream, and were then violently thrust into no-man’s land of identity. The author shows the complexity of emotion by employing a roller coaster of words and phrases related to the setting:

I walk confidently through the night over a small span of concrete which is part of the sidewalks which are part of the city which is part of the state and the country and the nation that is America. It is for this that I meant to fight, only the meaning got lost when I needed it most badly. Then he was on Jackson Street and walking down the hill. (Okada 34, 35)

Later, Ichiro has an epiphany that school might be an option for him. At first, he races toward the thought with abandon, but later is caught in a downward spiral of emotion as he changes his mind. Okada again uses direction to underscore

the incident as part of his journey. He wants to place the blocks of his life back together and return to a happier time.

Ichiro starts off “at Fourteenth Street where Jackson leveled off for a block before it resumed its gradual descent toward the bay” (Okada 52). He “hurled himself” on the bus and it “sped down Jackson Street and made a turn at Fourth” (Okada 52). He “visualized the blocks ahead, picturing in his mind the buildings he remembered,” pleased he could remember their names (Okada 52, 53).

As he recalled the past, he realized it was the same familiar route he used to take as a university student in the engineering program - when he was still a part of America. Ichiro “walked naturally toward the campus and up the wide curving streets” (Okada 53). Then he proceeds up the stairs to a “remote corner of the building which was reached finally by climbing a steep flight of stairs no more than twenty inches wide. By their very narrowness, the stairs seemed to avoid discovery by the mass of students” (Okada 54, 55). Ichiro finally realizes he no longer feels worthy of an American education. He feels trapped and going nowhere. “Outside... and alone again, he went down the narrow stairs...” Okada allows the reader to feel the funnel of tightness and compression that comes over Ichiro as he “hurried outside.”

Okada uses another interesting flow of movement to frame and symbolize Ichiro’s decision to sever his Japanese mother’s influence over him and reclaim his American identity. After he walks out on his mother’s funeral, Ichiro joins up with his friend Emi. They left together “... and felt relaxed and free and happy” (Okada 208). They head south on the main highway out of town to find a place to go and dance.

Ichiro uncharacteristically chooses to abandon the responsibility of participating in his dead mother’s ceremony and find a direction to be free and dance. His character has moved into a maturity defined by his own thoughts, feelings, and decisions rather than adhering to his Japanese mother’s ban on dancing. Okada presents the dance as the ultimate directional freedom and hopefulness.

Okada’s encompassing power over his materials is the kind of style of which Sir Joshua Reynolds speaks. Using the structure of his novel as a tool, the author paints an emotional picture of the Japanese American quandary by constructing the thought patterns from a map of the setting. In a unique manner, Okada employs particular directional motifs to outline Ichiro’s inner struggle as he confronts the deep racism and prejudice within his community and within his own soul.

It's because we're American and because we're Japanese and sometimes the two don't mix. It's all right to be German and American or Italian and American or Russian and American but, as things turned out, it wasn't all right to be Japanese and American. You had to be one or the other. (Okada 91)

By the end of the novel, Ichiro has made great strides and his heart truly has "mercifully stacked the blocks of hope into the pattern of an America which would someday hold an unquestioned place for him" (Okada 52). The painful journey of the modern Japanese American, which began with national rejection and incarceration, is as complicated as Ichiro's story. To find his identity and regain his civil rights, Ichiro had to stay in Seattle and fight for his rights. "If he was to find his way back to that point of wholeness and belonging, he must do so in the place where he had begun to lose it." (Okada 155) Okada charted a course for his protagonist meshing his literary technique and emotional pilgrimage. As Ichiro nears the end of his trek, he begins to accept himself, respect his heritage, and ultimately, find his true identity.

Works Consulted

- Conscience and the Constitution*. Dir. Frank Abe. 2000. Videocassette. Independent Television Service and PBS.
- Earhart, H. Byron. *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*. Belmont CA: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc, 1969.
- Gately, Patricia N., Dennis Leavens, and D. Cole Woodcox. *Perspectives on Self and Community in George Eliot: Dorothea's Window*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen P, 1997.
- Marquis, Amy Leinback. "The Other Prisoners of War." *National Parks Spring* 2007: 14+15.
- Okada, John. *No-No Boy*. 1957. Seattle: University of Washington, 1976.
- Rountree, Clark. "Instantiating 'The Law' and its Dissents in *Korematsu v United States*" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87.1 (Feb 2001): 1-24 pp. Ebsco. Academic Search Premier. Bridgewater State College, Bridgewater, MA. 10 Aug. 2008.
- Street Law and the Supreme Court Historical Society, n.d.: United States, ed. and comp. *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*. Civil Liberties Public Education Fund. Seattle: University of Washington P, 1997.
- Welty, Paul Thomas. *The Asians: Their Heritage and Their Destiny*. 4th ed. New York: J.B.Lippincott, 1973.