

IN SEARCH OF NO-NO BOY: CLASSROOM EDITION

Lesson 1: A Search for Identity

"I wish with all my heart that I were Japanese or that I were American. I am neither and I blame you and I blame myself and I blame the world which is made up of many countries which fight with each other and kill and hate and destroy but not enough, so that they must kill and hate and destroy again and again and again."

(*No-No Boy*, page 16)

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OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand why author John Okada chose a draft resister for his protagonist.
- Students will understand how Ichiro's search for identity reflects the experiences of the Nisei after their World War II incarceration.

This lesson links with the Essential Questions and Key Concepts outlined in the middle and high school assignments.

The assignments for these lessons are built around guiding questions from *Washington State Social Studies Classroom-Based Assessment: Constitutional Issues*. The assignments include rubrics and bridging documents.

Middle School Guiding Question:

[\(Washington State History\)](#) *What are the various perspectives on the role of Washington in the internment of Japanese Americans? How is this event related to our democratic ideals and how does it involve our responsibilities?*

High School Guiding Question:

[\(Challenges to Democracy and Human Rights 1900-present\)](#) *What are the implications of different definitions of human rights and civil rights? How does this issue relate to our democratic ideals and how does it involve our rights and responsibilities?*

This lesson uses quotes from the novel ***No-No Boy*** and video clips from the documentary ***In Search of No-No Boy: Classroom Edition***.

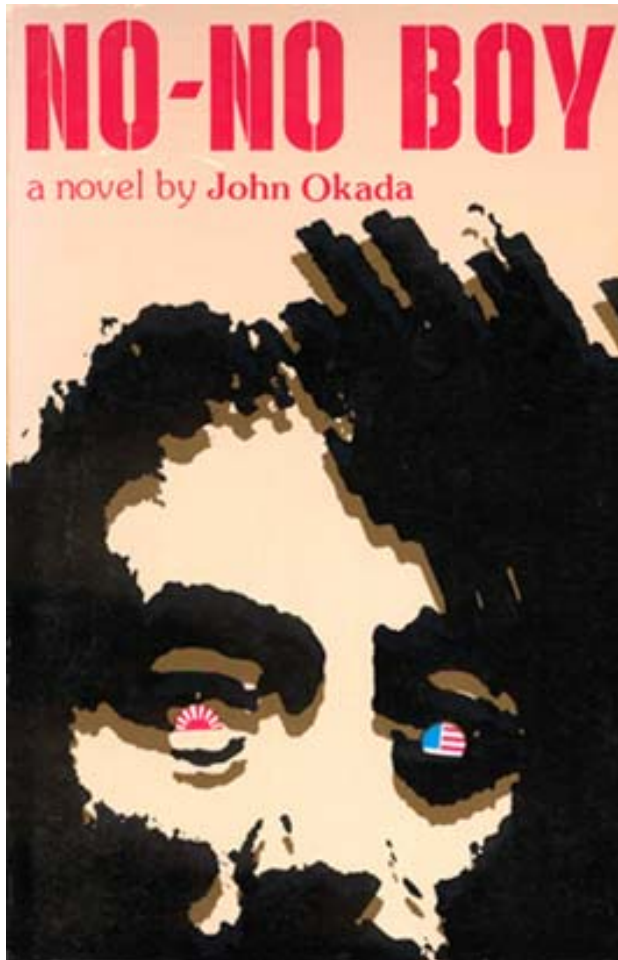
PREREQUISITES

This lesson is designed to be integrated into existing study of the novel ***No-No Boy***. As such, it is assumed that students are reading or have read the novel.

Review the *Introduction* for background information and prerequisites before starting this lesson. Instructors may wish to introduce students to the underlying themes in this lesson by first reviewing *Lesson 2: One Path to Loyalty?*

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"In World War Two, solely because of their race, Japanese Americans endure expulsion from their homes, four years in American concentration camps, and a return to broken communities. Yet no postwar literature gave voice to their quiet anger at unjust imprisonment. In the 1950's John Okada decides he must write that book."
(00:15)

INTRODUCTION

The underlying foundation of the novel *No-No Boy* is the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, even though the novel itself does not take place in camp.

Okada creates an authentic picture of the cultural sensibility of Japanese America after the camps. His protagonist defies the popular definition of loyalty as defined by the government and the leaders of his community, and initially appears to succumb to the false notion of the dual identity, the belief that he must be either Japanese or American.

The *search for identity* is a key theme in the novel. Protagonist Ichiro Yamada and other characters constantly question "who" they are and where they fit in – in a city that has changed in the four years since their expulsion from their homes, and at a time when war and dislocation have interrupted the start of their adult lives.

The cover for the 1976 paperback edition of the novel captures the false distinctions the world imposes on Ichiro — the Japanese "rising sun" flag in one eye, the U.S. flag in the other. (Subsequent paperback reprints eliminated the blue color in the U.S. flag.)

Ichiro's search for identity parallels the experience of the Nisei, the second-generation Japanese Americans born in the U.S. who were imprisoned in camp with their parents, the Issei, immigrant first generation. Each of the characters in the novel represents a facet of the Issei and Nisei experience during and after camp.

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THE AUTHOR IN THE NOVEL

John Okada was among the first group of young Nisei to obtain clearance to leave the camp at Minidoka, Idaho, to attend college on the outside. He enrolled at Scottsbluff Junior College in Nebraska, then enlisted in the Army and was trained as a Japanese language translator by the Military Intelligence Service. He was assigned to the 8th Army Air Forces Radio Squadron Mobile stationed in Guam, where he volunteered to fly dangerous missions in B-24's over Japanese-held islands, translating intercepted radio messages.

Okada the author opens his novel with an enigmatic exchange between a nameless Nisei airman and his radar operator, a "blond giant" from Nebraska, a Midwestern state from which Japanese Americans were not excluded. This passage sets up and explains all the events in the story that follow:

(15:17 and pg. x-xi) December the seventh of the year 1941 was the day when the Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor ...

Two years later a good Japanese-American who had volunteered for the army sat smoking in the belly of a B-24 on his way back to Guam from a reconnaissance flight to Japan. His job was to listen through his earphones, which were attached to a high-frequency set, and jot down air-ground messages spoken by Japanese-Japanese in Japanese planes and in Japanese radio shacks.

The lieutenant who operated the radar-detection equipment was a blond giant from Nebraska. The lieutenant from Nebraska said: "Where you from?"

The Japanese-American who was an American soldier answered: "No place in particular."

"You got folks?"

"Yeah, I got folks."

"Where at?"

"Wyoming, out in the desert."

"Farmers, huh?"

"Not quite."

"What's that mean?"

"Well, it's this way" And then the Japanese American whose folks were still Japanese-Japanese, or else they would not be in a camp with barbed wire and watchtowers with soldiers holding rifles, told the blond giant from Nebraska about the removal of the Japanese from the Coast, which was called the evacuation, and about the concentration camps, which were called relocation centers.

The lieutenant listened and he didn't believe it. He said: "That's funny. Now, tell me again."

The Japanese-American soldier of the American army told it again and didn't change a word.

The lieutenant believed him this time. "Hell's bells," he exclaimed, "if they'd done that to me, they could kiss my ass."

"I got reasons," said the Japanese-American soldier soberly.

Ask students: why doesn't the "blond giant" from Nebraska know about the camps?

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WHO IS ICHIRO YAMADA?

Ichiro Yamada is the protagonist of *No-No Boy*. He is a Nisei, second-generation Japanese American, an American citizen by virtue of his birth in the U.S.

Ichiro was 21 years old and an engineering student in college in 1942 when all Japanese Americans were excluded from the West Coast and ordered into American concentration camps. When the government in 1944 began to draft young men out of camp, Ichiro refuses to report for induction (see *Lesson 2: One Path to Loyalty?*) while many of his friends chose to volunteer or be drafted into the U.S Army and fight overseas. Ichiro was released from prison one year after his friends who survive return from combat.

(4:01) "Ichiro is sort of the conscience of the community...he made it a very personal decision. He could have gotten out of the draft by a physical condition... He chose to stand up for what he really believed in, and he believed that volunteering for the draft when a country has taken away his civil rights is wrong, and so he chose to go to prison." (Shawn Wong)

Why would Okada, a veteran, choose a draft resister as his protagonist? One possibility is that in order to expose the divisions in his community created as a result of war and forced incarceration, Okada found it more effective to tell his story through the eyes of an outcast, someone considered a pariah both inside and outside the Japanese American community.

(7:13) "He's writing not only about a draft resister. [Ichiro] is emblematic of all Japanese Americans, who felt that this history of theirs somehow not just tainted them, but made them less than or other than American." (Stephen Sumida, University of Washington)

As portrayed in the novel, Ichiro seems to have made his decision to resist the draft alone, and never states a principle for his actions. He thinks of all the people who were unfairly treated in the forced expulsion, "*It is for this that I meant to fight, only the meaning got lost when I needed it most badly.*" (pg. 34). He can barely articulate his own reasons for refusing the draft: "*My reason was all the reasons put together. I did not go because I was weak and could not do what I should have done.*" Throughout the novel Ichiro is torn by the choice he made.

Once home, Ichiro bounces from one friend to another, from one event to another, looking for a place where he can fit back in and resume a life that has been interrupted by war, expulsion, incarceration, imprisonment, and social ostracism. Because his experiences have made him uncertain as to who he is, he no longer knows how to acknowledge the support offered to him by friends and strangers.

For more information on the draft resisters, see *Lesson 2: One Path to Loyalty?*

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JAPANESE, AMERICAN, OR JAPANESE AMERICAN?

How do Japanese Americans fit back into their home community after being exiled under the suspicion, however unfounded, of being loyal to a nation that had attacked the U.S.? Ichiro embodies many of the confusions of the Nisei who returned to Seattle after being imprisoned in camp along with their immigrant Issei parents.

Befitting his nickname of "Itchy," he is trying to scratch an itch that won't stop. He wonders just who he is. Is he Japanese? American? Or a third distinct identity: "Japanese American?"

(17:41) There was a time when I was your son...and we were Japanese with Japanese feelings and Japanese pride and Japanese thoughts even if we lived in America.

Then there came a time when I was only half Japanese because one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America without becoming American and loving it. But I did not love enough, for you were still half my mother and I was thereby still half Japanese.

From No-No Boy, page 7: *"...for his parents, like most of the old Japanese, spoke virtually no English. On the other hand, the children, like Ichiro, spoke almost no Japanese..."*

Ichiro, page 9: *"It's because we're American and because we're Japanese and sometimes the two don't mix ... you had to be one or the other."*

On page 125, a young Nisei talks to an unwilling audience of Issei in the camps: *"I am a Nisei and you old ones are like my own mother and father. If we are sons and daughters of American and not the sons and daughters of our parents, it is because you have failed ... this is America ... this is not Japan."*

Ask students:

- How do you "identify" yourself?
- Does your race or your outward appearance define you in the eyes of others or to yourself?
- What values do you share with your friends? With your family? With adults? Are any of the values you share with others "American?"

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SNEAKING BACK INTO AMERICA

Resettlement back on the West Coast was not easy. Compounding the lingering racial resentment against them, many Japanese Americans internalized their experience of exile and imprisonment as evidence of some wrongdoing on their part:

(7:32) Graphics over the following clip: "WE DON'T WANT ANY JAPS BACK HERE ... EVER" sign on cash register; "DEATH TO JAPS" graffiti on garage door and sidewalk step; "Japs keep moving".

*"In my experience, after camp was really difficult. Because in a sense, we re-immigrated to America from camp, and we had to adjust to this society that had changed because of the war, and we always had this feeling **of having snuck back into America**. (Lawson Inada, poet)*

*(7:58) Because all of Japanese America was punished, it means that they must've done something wrong. So it's kind of a backwards logic. Because I was punished, I must have done wrong. What did I do wrong? And that's Ichiro's question. And of course the answer was, **you were born the wrong race**. (Stephen Sumida, University of Washington)*

Ask students:

- How would you react if you felt you had done everything asked of you to prove your loyalty to a group or a cause and were told it still wasn't "good" enough?
- How would you react if you felt you were born into the "wrong" race?

The families of the draft resisters were ostracized both outside and **inside** the Japanese American community.

(18:54) In life, the mothers of soldiers who fought and died in the war, close ranks to shun the mother of the draft resister.

"I believe that my mother suffered because of the stand I took. She got ostracized. She got cut away from the Issei community. And the last thing that happened was, she was told not come to church. So she told me, 'I can't even go to church.' And it was shortly thereafter she took her life." (Jim Akutsu, the model for Ichiro Yamada)

Okada incorporates this tragedy into his novel.

(18:29) "The mother (in the book) is believing somehow Japan has won. This is not the mother that he had left. So obviously in the ensuing years the whole wartime incarceration has driven her crazy." (Gail Nomura, University of Washington)

When Ichiro's mother begins to realize the truth, she drowns herself.

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WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR THIS LESSON

Ichiro wonders throughout the novel whether he is Japanese or American before arriving at a vague sense of a third, distinct possibility: "Japanese American."

Ask a person for their ancestry ("What are you?") and they might say that they are Scots-Irish or part-Cherokee or bi-racial or "mixed," American, Canadian, or English. Even if we don't know or don't want to talk about our own racial and/or cultural heritage, we are aware that we have one.

Children of recent immigrants to America are very aware of their different identities. Home may be a place where a second language is spoken or where the customs and traditions of the "old country" rule. Outside the home, the world may be completely different: different language, different rules, and different expectations.

Imagine that you must move to a new and very different country — different climate, different religions, different values, a place where you don't look or act like the people around you.

Write a journal entry of 200 words or more sharing your feelings about the move. Do you want to fit in to your new home? If yes, how do you plan to fit in? If not, what will you do? Your children will be born in the new country. Is it possible to instill the values of the "old country" in them?