



King Street Station, Seattle, c. 1939

IN SEARCH OF *NO-NO BOY*: CLASSROOM EDITION

Lesson 3: Metaphors for the Camp Experience

*"It was a dirty looking tower of ancient brick. It was a dirty city.
Dirtier, certainly, than it had a right to be after only four years."
(*No-No Boy*, page 1)*

- [Objectives and Prerequisites](#)
- [Introduction](#)
- [Using the Landscape of the Pacific Northwest as a Metaphor for Japanese American Internment](#)
- ["A Glimmer of Hope" for Japanese America](#)
- [Momotaro: The Peach Boy](#)
- [Urashima Taro](#)

IN SEARCH OF NO-NO BOY: CLASSROOM EDITION

Metaphors for the Camp Experience

OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand that the novel *No-No Boy* is an allegory for the experiences of Japanese Americans in the incarceration camps.
- Students will understand how the author uses the weather and landscape of post-war Seattle as a metaphor for the camps.

The middle school and high school 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. This lesson supports the Social Studies content in *A Search for Identity* and *One Path to Loyalty*?

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 have read or are already reading 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 1: A Search for Identity* and *Lesson 2: One Path to Loyalty*?

INTRODUCTION

The novel *No-No Boy* is an allegory for the postwar experience of Japanese Americans who were expelled from their homes and imprisoned in World War II in American concentration camps. Author John Okada employs a number of metaphors and Japanese folktales to structure his work.

IN SEARCH OF NO-NO BOY: CLASSROOM EDITION

Metaphors for the Camp Experience

USING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AS A METAPHOR FOR JAPANESE AMERICAN INCARCERATION

Okada uses the landscape and the weather of the Pacific Northwest to suggest the emotional landscape of a prison camp – a prison camp that was also home.

The **clock tower** at King Street Station looms over the landscape. It could be seen from almost every corner of Seattle's Pioneer Square and what remained of Japantown after the war. Symbolically, the clock tower resembles a guard tower in camp, as well providing a reminder that time has passed and is passing (see "Urashima Taro" below).

"He walked toward the railroad depot where the tower with the clocks on all four sides was. It was a dirty looking tower of ancient brick." (pg. 1)

Jackson Street is the heart of Japantown, which Okada describes as literally on "the other side of the tracks."

"For Ichiro, Jackson Street signified that section of the city immediately beyond the railroad tracks between Fifth and Twelfth Avenues. That was the section which used to be pretty much Japanese town ... Being on Jackson Street with its familiar store fronts and taverns and restaurants, which were somehow different because the war had left its mark on them, was like trying to find one's way out of a dream." (pg. 4-5)



The **Wonder Bread bakery** is Ma's destination as she walks up the hill along Jackson Street every afternoon to get fresh bread for the store. The walk is 13 ½ blocks and then, as now, the landscape changes from Chinatown/Japantown to a transitional neighborhood of old and young, black, white, and Asian. Metaphorically, Ma makes the pilgrimage in and out of camp every day, but returns.

The **Club Oriental** is entered through a door in a narrow, dark alley. It's based on the former Wah Mee Club (photo on right), on Maynard Alley between King and Weller Streets. The Wah Mee was one of the few places in Seattle where all the races could mix, though not always peacefully. Fights were common, just as described in the novel. Author John Okada would take his friend Jim Akutsu drinking there to learn more about his reasons for contesting the draft.



Water imagery figures prominently in the novel.

"It was the sort of morning that non-Seattleites are always ascribing to Seattle – wet without being really wet and the whole city enveloped in a kind of dull, grayish, thin fog." (pg. 215)

Ma receives a letter from her sister in Japan reminding her of the time that Ma almost drowned. It is a secret that she and her sister had kept from everyone (pg. 109). Although

IN SEARCH OF NO-NO BOY: CLASSROOM EDITION

Metaphors for the Camp Experience

Ichiro's mother says her sister must have been tortured for this information, she realizes that perhaps the letters are real. She stands in the rain, *"...the soft rain as always, drizzling and miserable and deceptively cold."* (pg. 175) And soon after, Ma drowns herself in the bathtub, *"her hair of dirty gray and white floating up like seaweed."* (pg. 185)

When Ichiro realizes that Freddie's devil-may-care attitude is a façade, he understands what lies beneath Freddie's nervous movement: *"It was like being on a pair of water-skis, skimming over the top as long as one traveled at a reasonable speed, but, the moment he slowed down or stopped, it was to sink into the nothingness that offered no real support."* (pg. 201)

"A GLIMMER OF HOPE" FOR JAPANESE AMERICA

After a final fistfight and the sudden death of Freddie, Ichiro leaves the dark alleyway to find some hope for his future and, by extension, the future of Japanese America.

"A glimmer of hope – was that it? It was there, someplace. He couldn't see it to put it into words, but the feeling was pretty strong. He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart." (pg. 250-51)

Ask students: What events in the novel foreshadow Ichiro's realization of "a glimmer of hope?"

MOMOTARO: THE PEACH BOY

Ichiro remembers his mother telling him a story *"...about the old woman who found the peach in the stream and took it home and, when her husband split it in half, a husky little boy tumbled out to fill their hearts with boundless joy. I was that boy in the peach and you were the old woman."* (pg. 15)

Okada is invoking the story of **Momotaro**, the "peach boy" and warrior who restores a stolen history to his people. After finding the boy inside a giant peach, the childless couple name him Momotaro, from *momo* (peach), and raise him to become a warrior. Every year their village is raided by marauding *oni* (demons or ogres) who come to torture, kill and rob the village of its treasures. When he turns 15, Momotaro sets out for the island of Onigashima to destroy the *oni* that dwell there. Along the way he befriends a talking dog, a monkey, and a pheasant, animals who would not normally work together, and together they slay the demons and recover the plunder of a thousand years.¹

The treasures Momotaro recovers represent the villagers' past, emblems of their shared history, so that in essence Momotaro and his companions are restoring the history of their people. In many ways, the camps worked to eradicate the history and culture of the incarcerated and sever their links to the past,² and in **No-No Boy** the author dramatizes a world in which Ichiro speaks of "a time that I no longer remember" before the war. Ichiro however, does remember, he does recall the story of Momotaro, and as the conscience of his community Ichiro works towards a reconnection with his past and a "glimmer of hope" for the future.

IN SEARCH OF NO-NO BOY: CLASSROOM EDITION

Metaphors for the Camp Experience

URASHIMA TARO

Okada presents Ichiro's return to Seattle in a way that recalls the Japanese folktale of **Urashima Taro**, to show how the passage of time prevents Ichiro from returning to the home and the world he once knew, according to Prof. Stephen Sumida.

In the folktale, Urashima Taro rescues an old sea turtle being tormented on the beach by some children. In gratitude, the turtle takes Urashima deep underwater to the palace of the Sea Princess, who captivates him with her beauty and grace. After three days Urashima asks to go home. The princess gives him a box which she says contains memories of his visit but warns him never to open it. The turtle returns Urashima to land, where he discovers that not three days but 300 years have passed, and everyone he ever knew is gone. Overcome by grief, he opens the box, out which floods the years he spent underwater, and he is turned into an old man and then a pile of dust.³

Like Urashima, Ichiro has spent "two years in camp and two years in prison" only to find he cannot return to the home from which he was removed. He sees all the ways in which Seattle and Jackson Street have changed, and looks inside to regret all the ways he has been changed. However, unlike Urashima, Ichiro through his journey begins to grow and adapt to the new world that faced Japanese America after the camps.

According to Prof. Sumida, the Urashima folktale was told by the Issei to their children with the awareness that they too could not return to the same land they left, a Japan which had also changed in their absence. The Issei had left their homes and come to America, and they could not return to Japan unchanged or find the world they had left behind.

Ask students to trace all the ways in which Ichiro's journey mirrors that of Momotaro and Urashima Taro.

¹ Momotaro, illustrated by George Suyeoka, Island Heritage Publishing, Aiea, HI, 1972.

² For a discussion of the camps as "a behavior modification system that worked," see Frank Chin's essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," pp. 52-61, in The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature, Meridian Books, New York, NY, 1991.

³ Urashima Taro, illustrated by George Suyeoka, adapted from the original folktales by Robert B. Goodman and Robert A. Spicer, Island Heritage Publishing, Aiea, HI, 1973.