

Introducing the Collection Theme

BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

17 What do you learn about the narrator of the story? According to the biography of the writer below, how much of the story is autobiographical?

Meet the Writer Julie Otsuka

Julie Otsuka (1962–) wrote this story as the first part of her Master of Fine Arts thesis. The story eventually became the first chapter of her novel *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002). Otsuka, who was born and raised in California, said this about the story:

“I had no idea when I started writing ‘Evacuation Order No. 19’—the first chapter of my novel—that it would turn into something larger. I’d never written anything serious before, only comic fiction, and had never intended to take on the subject of war. But the character of the woman in the story simply took up residence, one day, in my head: I saw her standing alone on a street, reading the evacuation notice for the first time, and then I followed her home to see who she was, and what she might do after that.”



Otsuka’s grandfather was arrested the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Later, her mother, uncle, and grandmother were sent to internment camps. Otsuka said in an interview,

“Aside from those basic facts, however—the arrest, being sent to a camp—the novel is entirely made up. The characters in the novel don’t resemble anyone in my own family. And since my family didn’t talk about the internment much, I had to re-create that time for myself.”

would clean other people’s houses much better than she ever had her own. Her back would grow strong and the years would go by quickly. Junior would have two more strokes and then die. The children would grow up. The boy would become a lieutenant colonel in the army and the girl would become my mother. 17 She would tell me many things but she would never speak of the war. The bottle of plum wine would continue to sit, unnoticed, gathering dust behind the furnace in the basement. It would grow darker and sweeter with every passing year. The leak in the roof has still, to this day, not been properly fixed.


After You Read

Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. What specific tasks does Mrs. Hayashi perform in this story, and why? What is the story’s **historical context**?

Thinking Critically

- Mrs. Hayashi never talks to her children about what is happening to them. How does she deal emotionally with what is happening to her family?
- After Mrs. Hayashi releases the bird and takes a sip of the plum wine, she starts laughing. How do you interpret this laughter?
- The mother is identified only as “Mrs. Hayashi,” and the son and daughter are never named. Why is this significant?
- Can Mrs. Hayashi be thought of as a hero? Cite specific details from the story to support your answer. (Also, check the Quickwrite notes you took before you read the story. Are any of the heroic traits you listed displayed by Mrs. Hayashi?) 

Literary Criticism

6. At the end of the story, we learn that Mrs. Hayashi takes a job cleaning houses after the internment. Find specific details that reveal how Mrs. Hayashi’s life before the war contrasts with the life she led after the internment.

Extending and Evaluating

7. Do you think a situation like the internment of the Japanese could happen in the United States today? Why or why not?

Japanese family ready to report for internment. Photograph by Dorothea Lange.



Exploring the Theme

Looking for Heroes

Why do we need heroes? Do the qualities that make a person a hero differ from one historical period to another? Are there any characteristics that all heroes have in common? As you read the stories in this collection, think about the answers to these questions.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Focus
Analyze biographical and historical approaches to text.