

HST 202
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Escaping Racism: Evolution of the Japanese-American

The book, *Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston, provides a first-hand account of life in the Japanese concentration camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Through Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's retelling of her experiences at the Manzanar Relocation Center, the audience is able to learn about how Pearl Harbor impacted American history during World War II. However, due to her being a mere ten years of age during her stay at Manzanar, at some points in her tale, it is her narration of the reactions and stories of her family members' pasts that allow the audience to truly see how America changed after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The best example would be the stories Wakatsuki Houston had shared about her Papa, from the time he arrived in America to the time she was in high school.

One important thing the audience was able to learn from her papa was how the attack on Pearl Harbor caused Americans to develop a fear and mistrust of even the most trustworthy Japanese living in America. In Chapter 7, "Fort Lincoln: An Interview", of the Houstons' *Farewell to Manzanar*, the first-person account of Papa's interview at Fort Lincoln, after being charged with aiding Japanese submarines, helps illustrate the reactions of American citizens involving extreme mistrust toward Japanese after the attack. It becomes clear that no Japanese person, no matter how long they had resided in America, was trusted by Americans when Papa informs his interviewer that he had been living in America since before his interviewer was even born. He then illustrates his frustration with the situation by stating that despite this "[he is] prevented by law from becoming a citizen. [He is] prevented by law from owning land. [He is] now separated from my family without cause" (p. 45). When looking at this situation one can see how Japan's actions prior to the attack, such as false messages of peace with America,

caused U.S. citizens to be unnecessarily wary toward Japanese even though many had made America their home long before.

Another important thing Papa helps teach the audience about American history is how the actions of Americans toward Japanese caused many successful lives to be destroyed after being built for decades in America. When Papa returned from Fort Lincoln to his family at Manzanar, he looked “over sixty, gaunt, wilted as his shirt, [and] underweight” (ch 5. p 32.). Although Papa was not separated from his family for more than a year, he had seemed to have aged several years. He was no longer the proud fisherman living off the coast of California. Instead, he was torn between the two countries he loved. Papa best describes how the war impacted the lives and emotions of those who had left Japan to make America their new home when he leaves his interviewer at Fort Lincoln with one thought-provoking statement: “When you mother and your father are having a fight, do you want them to kill each other? Or do you just want them to stop fighting?” (ch 7. p 46.).

The most important lesson the audience learns from Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s papa is how Japanese in America were forced to unwillingly give up the culture of their homeland in order to get past the racism in the United States that developed through fear and propaganda immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The night the Wakatsuki family found out about the attacks, Jeanne watched her papa burn his prized Japanese flag along with any paperwork that connected him to the country of Japan. The audience then sees Papa fighting the dying of his culture in his family at Manzanar when he asked Wakatsuki Houston how she was going to “find a good Japanese boy to marry” if she was baptized as a Catholic. While this scene in the story revealed a significant struggle to keep their pasts alive. However, shame seemed to truly set in on younger Japanese after the stories of violence committed on “Orientals” in America

causing the cultural war occurring in every Japanese-American home to be won by the U.S. The audience sees this most when Papa makes one last attempt at teaching his daughter Japanese traditions by making her a deal where she would be allowed to be the carnival queen “if [she started] odori lessons at the Buddhist church as soon as school is out” (ch 21. p 127.). This then failed because Papa was unable to rid the shame of being Japanese from the mind of Wakatsuki Houston, ultimately depicting the beginning of ease of Japanese into American culture. Unfortunately, instead of America accepting other cultures as part of their own as it had seemed to do for Papa in the beginning of the story, young Japanese were forced to accept American culture as their own, giving birth to a more modern Japanese-American.

The novel, *Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston, is a tale about the Wakatsuki Houston’s experiences as a Japanese citizen contained at the Manzanar Relocation Center when only taken in at only face value. However, once looking at each individual character, the most prominent being her papa, the audience is able to learn a little about how the attacks on Pearl Harbor impacted not only Japanese living in America, but also about the immediate reactions of Americans to the events, along with how the resulting racism among American citizens impacted the overall transformation of the Japanese-American culture.