

Farewell to manzanar analysis essay



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The book, Farewell to Manzanar was the story of a young Japanese girl coming of age in the interment camp located in Owens Valley, California. Less than two months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order, which stated that the War Department had the right to declare which people were a threat to the country, and move them wherever they so pleased. Since the West Coast had a large number of Japanese immigrants at the time, the Executive Order was basically an act that authorized the government to remove Japanese residing on the West Coast away from their homes and put them in these interment camps. As harsh as it may sound, the interment camps were nothing like the infamous Nazi interment camps of World War II. Manzanar residents enjoyed relatively comfortable living conditions, and lived fairly comfortable lives as compared to those of German interment camps. However, it was still rough, as many families were separated and emotional scars lingered long after the experience. Farewell to Manzanar is the story of one girl making the difficult transition to womanhood, at a difficult time, and at a difficult location. Two of the main life lessons that Jeannie learned during her stay at Manzanar dealt with the issues of her identity as an American against her Japanese heritage, and also with her treatment in school.

During her time at Manzanar, Jeannie was surrounded by almost exclusively Japanese people, and did not have much exposure to Caucasians, or people of other races. Therefore, she did not know what to truly expect when she went out into the "school world" outside of Manzanar. She had received some schooling while in Manzanar; however, the American schools were drastically different from the schools inside of Manzanar. While inside

Manzanar, Jeannie learned more skills in the fine arts, such as baton twirling, and ballet. Though “hard” subjects were taught, Jeannie didn’t mention them as much as she did about the baton twirling, ballet, and Catechesis. The schools at Manzanar were not much until the second year. The first year, volunteers taught the schools, and resources were pretty scarce. However, in the second year, teachers were hired, and the number of available supplies increased. One key thing that Jeannie remembers about her Manzanar schooling was her participation in the yearbook, and also with the Glee Club. The Glee Club gave her a sense of belonging, which is crucial to girls at her age. The psychological scars that the interment process left on Jeannie often left her feeling like she didn’t belong with the crowds, or with the other children. Even more shocking was the fact that she accepted these feelings as perfectly normal. Also distinct about her schooling at Manzanar was the fact that she felt very prepared to enter American schools. This showed how eager Jeannie was to be a part of mainstream American cultures, even though she may not have been welcomed. Jeannie’s experience in American schools was drastically different from her experience at Manzanar. She had problems making friends because the parents of the other children would not allow their children to befriend a Japanese girl. For Jeannie, the first thing an American girl said to her, “Gee, I didn’t know you spoke English” defined people’s attitudes toward her and other Japanese people at that time in history. However, most of the other children slowly accepted her, regardless of her race. On the opposite end of the spectrum, most of the parents and some of the teachers were very unreceptive to Jeannie for the simple fact that she was Japanese. This fact very much disappointed her, and she directly stated that when she said “From that point on, part of me yearned

to be invisible. In a way, nothing would have been nicer for no one to see me.” However, she was not excluded from all activities, as she was an active participant in athletics, scholarship, yearbook, newspaper, and student government. Her participation in these organizations made her feel like she was a small part of American culture, however she never truly felt like a part of American culture because of the fact that a few attitudes kept her from joining all organizations she was interested in. One crucial experience that made Jeannie feel like she was not truly wanted was the experience of trying to be the carnival queen for her high school. Jeannie utterly amazed the audience with her looks, and the majority of the students had voted for her. However, several teachers didn’t want to be embarrassed by having a Japanese girl represent their school, so they tried to stuff the ballot box. Even though she still won, this experience had given her a reality check of sorts. Even though she was allowed into the clubs and schools of the Americans, Jeannie never felt like she was a total part of American culture. One of the things that Jeannie struggled most with was what her cultural identity truly was. She wanted to grow up as the other children around her, which were Americans, were allowed to live, however, her father wanted her to grow up as a traditional Japanese woman. The carnival queen issue was a very crucial example of this struggle. Jeannie wore a low cut sarong, which showed off her body, to the queen tryouts, and garnered large amounts of applause in the process. However, both she and her Papa questioned whether or not this conflicted with her racial traditions. In Papa’s words, “Modesty is important. A graceful body is important. You don’t show your legs all the time. You don’t walk around like this.” Papa also accused her of wanting to marry a hakajin boy, which was an almost unbearable thought to

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Papa. No matter how thrilled she was to be the queen, she struggled with the fact that she was pretending to be of a culture which she did not belong to. She was dressed as an American, acting as an American, even though she was of Japanese descent. Under Papa's orders, she signed up for odori class, however, she performed terribly and was basically kicked out of class by the instructor. Jeannie Wakatsuki lived a very diverse life, as she was subjected to both life inside of an interment camp and American high school. Attending American high school was a character shaping experience, and even more so for someone of a minority race or gender. The experience lets them know where their race stands among others, and if they will be completely accepted in the "outside world". Unfortunately for Jeannie, she was not totally accepted by others throughout her life, and that left psychological scars on her. However, she came out of these experiences a better and more well rounded person, so they were not totally negative for her. A note of interest is that she ended up marrying a non-Japanese person, possibly due to her growing up and maturing around non-Japanese. The book Farewell to Manzanar fully illustrates her thoughts and feelings throughout this process.