

Coping with the  
uncontrollable in a  
tale for the time being



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Japanese culture differs significantly from culture in the Western world. In Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, these differences are prevalent as Nao visits bathhouses, discovers manga, and witnesses the significance of suicide in her country. But perhaps most importantly, Nao learns the principals of Zen Buddhism from her grandmother Jiko who preaches acceptance of the inherently uncontrollable aspects of life. Throughout the novel, various characters experience a lack of control in their lives and react very differently. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki utilizes symbolism to represent the uncontrollable and demonstrate how the inability to exhibit power over a situation affects different people.

The author utilizes the auction of Nao's panties as a symbol of powerlessness. When Nao's father discovers the auction, he attempts to bid on them in order to prevent other hentais from violating his daughter's privacy. To his dismay, Haruki lacks the money to be the highest bidder and consequently loses the auction and the ability to protect his own daughter, eventually deciding to take his own life. Before he attempts suicide, Haruki leaves a note saying " I should only make myself ridiculous in the eyes of others if I clung to life and hugged it when I have no more to offer" (Ozeki 284). His lack of control of the safety and wellbeing of his daughter leaves Haruki powerless and ultimately drives him to seek death. In this final attempt of the ultimate self-destruction, Nao's father demonstrates his inability to cope with powerlessness. Without any control of his daughter's protection, Haruki seeks what he perceives as the only thing he does have control of—his own demise.

Much like her father, Nao's coping mechanism over her powerlessness is one of destruction; however, unlike her own suicidal parent, Nao reacts to this lack of control with rebelliousness and psychological self-destruction. In the novel, Ozeki uses Haruki's mental instability to symbolize that which Nao cannot control. She perceives her father as weak, wishing he would be more like Haruki 1 who she believes died valiantly in war. In his second failed suicide, Nao's inability to control her father's bouts of depression and attempts at suicide finally causes her to break as she writes to him " if you're going to do something, please do it properly" (286). As a major source of stress, Haruki's instability drives Nao to wish her father would simply die. In this frustration, Nao becomes unstable herself, cutting her hair off and prostituting herself as a result of the inability to control her father. Similar to her Haruki, Nao's powerlessness drives her to a path of destruction both internal and external, as her frustration harms not only those close to her but also herself.

Unlike Nao and her father, Nao's grandmother Jiko reacts peacefully to that which she cannot control. Her philosophy is perhaps best reflected in Ozeki's use of waves as a symbol of the uncontrollable. When Nao visits her grandmother for the summer, Jiko takes her to the beach and asks, " have you ever bullied a wave?" to which Nao reacts with confusion (193). In compliance with her grandmother's request, Nao runs into the ocean with a stick and ferociously attacks the water. Despite her futile attempts, she continues to beat the waves, repeatedly getting knocked down in the process. While she finally admits defeat, Nao is left satisfied. This odd request of Jiko is a method of teaching her granddaughter a valuable lesson

—it is best to accept those things, which are uncontrollable rather than fight them. With this very Zen philosophy, Jiko's persona differs greatly from those of her son and granddaughter. Instead of reacting to a lack of control with anger and destruction, Jiko accepts her powerlessness, welcoming the environment that she cannot change.

Despite the fact that many characters in the novel experience grave hardships, Ruth Ozeki ironically uses these serious topics of bullying and suicide to illustrate a theme of positivity—no matter how bleak a situation may be, there is always a reason to keep working and, even more importantly, keep living. This is perhaps best reflected in Nao and her father; it becomes clear at the end of the novel that both made the correct decision to choose life over death when Haruki is able to establish a strong relationship with his daughter and achieve success in his job. Ultimately, both are able to recover from their painful pasts and find happiness, something that would have been completely missed had they chosen death.