

## Example Student Essay

### Analyzing the Language and Composition of “Farewell to Manzanar”

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which proclaimed that anyone on the West Coast deemed a threat to national security was to be relocated to militarized internment camps that were more inland. The victims of Executive Order 9066 were primarily those of Japanese ancestry due to the rising tensions with the Japanese in World War II. In an excerpt from “Farewell to Manzanar”, a memoir co-written by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston in 1973, Wakatsuki Houston recalls her experience as a Japanese American living in one of these internment camps in order to aid the audience in sympathizing with Japanese Americans who lived during the war; whose identities and interests were torn in two by their circumstances. The author achieves this by reciting a specific, personal anecdote from which she can build her argument from; by using descriptive imagery that immerses the audience in her vulnerable memories that living in the camp caused; and by injecting her observations of her father in order to portray the detrimental psychological effects that WWII had on first-generation Japanese Americans. Wakatsuki lays forth this experience in order to help readers sympathize with the identity crises that many Asian Americans, and racial minorities as a whole, endure while living in America to promote a more open and accepting worldview. This book was released at a time where tolerance and understanding were making leaps and bounds and where, white people especially, were more than willing to listen to the plights of minorities; people around the world today are still reading the story of Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston.

This excerpt of “Farewell to Manzanar” documents Wakatsuki’s life when she was a child living in a Japanese internment camp by the name of Manzanar. It opens with her father arriving at camp after his detention following false allegations of helping the enemy and continues chronologically up until her family and a family friend are gathered around a stove, singing Japanese songs, including the Japanese national anthem (Houston 705-712). These sequential events are told in impressively specific and descriptive detail and feed into the overarching narrative of her experience in Manzanar. Because her argument hinges on an anecdote, it provides her credibility and is difficult to refute. Anecdotes are simply events that happened and can’t be taken in a “wrong way” if they are presented (mostly) objectively as Wakatsuki does. Stories also have the advantage of being able to be corroborated by other people if someone thinks the storyteller is not telling “the truth”. Wakatsuki’s narrative helps her argument of empathizing with Asian Americans because it provides an irrefutable foundation from which the rest of her argument can build upon.

In order to help her anecdote become more convincing, Wakatsuki frequently uses imagery to immerse the reader in her memories to illustrate the sensitivities that living in Manzanar caused. A prime example of this vivid language is where Wakatsuki reminisces on a time where her family and a family friend had found solace and relaxation after her father had gotten in a fight. The Wakatsuki family were stuck inside due to a dust storm without electricity and were all huddled together around a small oil stove. The author had already gone to bed, but the rest of her family and their family friend were still gathered. Papa and the family friend had “[begun] to sing songs in Japanese, warming their hands on either side of the stove, facing each other in its glow” (Houston 711). One of the songs they began to sing was the Japanese national

anthem while the rest of the family had begun to hum the melody. In this section of the passage, the author's language helps to convey a sense of sorrowful relief and tranquility. Papa has been through extremely stress-inducing circumstances up until this moment, with his detention and infights with other campers, so just a blip of time where he can somewhat decompress must be freeing. Yet it is also a gloomy time because he seems to be finally analyzing and reflecting; which causes him to let himself go from any emotional shackles that were weighing him down. The comforting security in this scene that is portrayed in the word choice, like the warm glow of the stove, gives this image in the reader's head of a place where Papa can safely self-reflect and cry. Wakatsuki's use of imagery in this scene helps readers sympathize with Asian Americans' struggles by showing a side of vulnerability that is created because of their divisive circumstances.

Much of the imagery in the passage focuses on showing Wakatsuki's father as a paradigm for the feelings of many first-generation WWII-era Japanese Americans. During WWII, many Japanese Americans had their loyalties tested and torn by the actions of both the Japanese and American governments. Issei (first-generation immigrants) especially had a difficult time, having known both Japan and America as home. The author shares her outsider perspective on her father's deteriorating mental state because of this loyalty test. She shares that her father used to abuse alcohol following his detention. Their house had smelled so bad because of his homemade brews to the point where her mother was ashamed to have visitors. He would drink until he was blackout drunk, wake up hungover, and repeat the cycle. This unbreakable habit of his was so intolerable and hazardous that his whole family was terrified of him. When people, like Wakatsuki's mother, would try to intervene, they would simply get mistreated and abused (Houston 711). The immense stress had forced Wakatsuki's father to alcoholism as a means to nullify the excruciating mental turmoil he was enduring. Not only does this story make the audience sympathize with her father because of his alcoholism, but also with her family that are the victims of him and are coming to question their own racial identity because of it.

The terrifying normalcy of a story involving an alcoholic parental figure will resonate with at least a portion of Wakatsuki's readers and will make them feel for her family and other Japanese Americans. If someone shares a story that other people are able to relate to, other people may also be open to sympathizing with them in other ways, regardless of any other differences they may have. Making something less alien and more human is an effective way in starting a bond that can lead to greater understanding on other issues. Wakatsuki's focus on her father helps strengthen the idea of sympathizing with racial minorities by humanizing them in a way that racial majorities may be able to relate to.

This excerpt from "Farewell to Manzanar" serves to convince the audience to sympathize with Japanese Americans by basing its argument on an anecdote, using evocative imagery, and highlighting the story of Wakatsuki's father. Japanese Americans at the time of WWII had their identities and loyalties fragmented and tested over and over again, but Asian Americans and other racial minorities today are still going through the same identity crises. Wakatsuki's text inspires other racial minorities to share their own stories with divisive racial identity and loyalty and encourages everyone to adopt a more accepting worldview.