

THESIS: In *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa explores through characterization, contrast, and figurative language a woman's exploration of her past to suggest the impact of personal resolution.

As the novel opens, Naomi is initially indifferent about her past. By the end of novel, the nature of Naomi's experience is made clear: racial hostility, issues with maternal abandonment, and so on—but early in the novel, Naomi is characterized as very timid and uncomfortable with herself, evidenced by how she allows her sixth grade students to treat her. Naomi describes one of her students, Sigmund, as “trouble” (7). Her manner is sedate which allows him to ask her intrusive questions about dating and her ethnicity. Because she is not white, she is mistaken as “a foreigner” (8). Because she is unmarried, her student tells her “‘You’re a spinster’” (9). Her response is not a hostile, defensive one; instead she tries to mollify him by asking him what ‘spinster’ means after self-denigrating herself as “hav[ing] the social graces of a common housefly”(9). Because of how Kogawa structures the novel—gradually revealing Naomi's past non-chronologically—Naomi at this point only displays a high degree of introverted reserve. As Kogawa reveals the internment Naomi and her family suffered during WW II, Kogawa establishes how Naomi came to be as timid as she is. However, the internment is not the sole experience that has informed Naomi's character; the disappearance of her mother and the absence of resolution of this issue has created far greater influence in her life.

In Naomi's adult life before she returns home for her uncle's funeral, she is not concerned with her past, much less resolving any lingering issues she has with it. In fact, she recalls her deceased uncle's widow—Obasan—re-marking, “It is better to forget” (54) then pondering “What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain. Questions from all these papers, questions referring to turbulence in the past, are an unnecessary upheaval...”(54-55). Until the point of her return home at age thirty-six for her uncle's funeral, Naomi has not given any thought to the importance of her past experiences, and she clearly has

Comment [c1]: This acknowledges the prompt

Comment [c2]: This suggests the MOPAW—why unique insight into the novel

Comment [c3]: Perspective—This shows the first point about her thoughts about her past—she is unconcerned with it.

Comment [c4]: COLON
I use a colon because I set up my sentence to make a state something: the parts of her experience.

Comment [c5]: I use lit teq to show I as a reader am able to understand how the author depicts Naomi, which allows me to analyze how she changes throughout the novel.

Comment [c6]: Notice that I have several quotations and that they are all short. Quotes don't have to be long; they should be as direct as possible

Comment [c7]: Since the prompt makes a point about the structure of the novel, I am acknowledging it here and will do so several other times in the essay to show that I can make sense out of this element in the novel

Comment [c8]: DASH
Notice that I use the dashes to set apart this clause they way I might with commas of a non-essential clause

Comment [c9]: SEMI-COLON
Join two clauses with a semi-colon when not using a coordinating conjunction.

OTHER SEMI-COLON RULES: when joining items in a series that have commas in the items, and when joining two clauses using a transitive adverb like “however”

Comment [c10]: Notice that I set up my next paragraph idea in the last sentence of the paragraph: the past matters a great deal in her life. The topic sentence in the following paragraph sets up this idea: she has lingering issues with the past.

Comment [c11]: HYPHEN

made a concerted effort to reject such events, but she does make a few concessions which the

metaphoric language reveals: past pain, turbulence, upheaval—words that describe an

acknowledgement that issues lie in the past that perhaps demand her attention. Kogawa introduces

another character—Naomi's Aunt Emily—as a character of contrast. Aunt Emily is unmarried as well,

but “she refuses the label” (10). Also by contrast, Aunt Emily once implored Naomi to realize that “you

are your history. If you cut it off you're and amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If

you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene” (60). Through Aunt Emily's collections

of letters and diary, Naomi gains a portal into her past that she only gradually enters through. Kogawa

uses these documents as a structural device for Naomi to confront the mysteries of her own life to show

Naomi's innate need for resolution.

Aunt Emily urges Naomi to confront and acknowledge the nature of her past, but she also

provides the avenue through which Naomi can make this confrontation in the form of a package of

documents and a diary. Through these documents, Kogawa shows how Naomi makes her discoveries

and realizations. Naomi recalls being dismissive of the past when she said to Aunt Emily: “the past so

long. Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?” (51) to which Aunt Emily responds: “The past is the

future”(51). This minimal interest on the part of Naomi gradually develops during the week that Naomi

is at home for her uncle's funeral as she immerses herself in the memories of her past during her and

her family's wartime internment. She recalls the social injustice they suffers during this time as well as

various family experiences—some tender, some frightening, some cruel. However, she slowly arrives at

a point of ease about confronting the past she once deemed unimportant.

NEXT PARAGRAPH—I will establish that she transforms her desire to ignore the past into an immersion in the past

NEXT BODY PARAGRAPH—I will analyze how she makes the final step into confronting the unknown about her mother and grandmother

Comment [c12]: I am analyzing the metaphors in the quote above to build my point.

Comment [c13]: DASH
Again, setting apart a phrase about the word 'character'

Comment [c14]: Contrast is a lit teq that allows us in this case to understand the characters of both Emily and Naomi

Comment [c15]: Again notice how I am actually establishing transition without randomly slapping on a transitive adverb