

when the emperor was divine

when the emperor was divine is a critically acclaimed novel by Julie Otsuka that explores the harrowing experience of Japanese American internment during World War II. The book delves into themes of identity, displacement, and resilience through the eyes of a family forcibly removed from their home and confined in a relocation camp. This literary work offers a poignant perspective on a dark chapter in American history, illuminating the emotional and psychological impact of internment on individuals and families. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the novel's themes, characters, historical context, and literary style. Additionally, it examines the significance of the title and its symbolism within the narrative. The following sections will guide readers through an in-depth exploration of *when the emperor was divine*, highlighting its enduring relevance and contribution to American literature.

- Overview of the Novel
- Historical Context of Japanese American Internment
- Main Characters and Their Development
- Themes and Symbolism
- Literary Style and Narrative Structure
- Significance of the Title
- Critical Reception and Legacy

Overview of the Novel

When the emperor was divine is a succinct yet powerful novel that chronicles the forced relocation and incarceration of a Japanese American family during World War II. The story is told through multiple perspectives, including the mother, father, son, and daughter, each offering a unique viewpoint on their shared experience. The narrative captures the loss of freedom, the uncertainty of internment, and the struggle to maintain dignity amid injustice. Julie Otsuka's prose is spare and evocative, emphasizing the emotional weight of silence and absence as much as the events themselves. The novel's structure reflects the fragmentation of family life and identity caused by internment.

Historical Context of Japanese American Internment

The backdrop of *when the emperor was divine* is the historical reality of Japanese American internment during World War II. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, over 120,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes on the West Coast and placed into

internment camps under Executive Order 9066.

Executive Order 9066

Signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942, Executive Order 9066 authorized the military to designate exclusion zones and remove any persons deemed a threat to national security. This order led to the mass evacuation and incarceration of Japanese Americans regardless of citizenship or loyalty.

Life in the Internment Camps

Internment camps were often located in remote areas with harsh living conditions. Families lived in cramped barracks with minimal privacy and inadequate facilities. The camps stripped internees of their possessions and autonomy, creating a profound sense of dislocation and trauma.

- Overcrowded communal living spaces
- Strict military oversight and curfews
- Limited access to education and employment
- Psychological effects of confinement and discrimination

Main Characters and Their Development

The novel's strength lies in its intimate portrayal of a Japanese American family fragmented by internment. Each family member represents different facets of the experience, and their development highlights the varied emotional responses to displacement and prejudice.

The Mother

The mother is a central figure who embodies resilience and sacrifice. Throughout the novel, her silence and composure convey the burden of protecting her family amidst uncertainty. Her internal struggles and gradual transformation underscore the emotional toll of internment.

The Father

The father's absence during much of the novel symbolizes the disruption of family unity. His arrest and disappearance reflect the suspicion and injustice faced by Japanese American men, often perceived as potential threats despite their loyalty.

The Children

The son and daughter offer contrasting perspectives on innocence and awareness. The son's confusion and fear highlight the impact of internment on youth, while the daughter's observations reveal a growing consciousness of racial identity and injustice.

Themes and Symbolism

When the emperor was divine explores several profound themes through its narrative, using symbolism to deepen the reader's understanding of internment's consequences.

Identity and Alienation

The theme of identity is central, as characters grapple with their Japanese heritage and American citizenship. Internment forces a redefinition of self, often marked by alienation and loss.

Family and Separation

The fragmentation of the family unit is a recurring motif. Separation from the father and the physical displacement challenge familial bonds and highlight the resilience required to maintain connection.

Silence and Voice

Otsuka's use of silence—both literal and figurative—symbolizes the suppression of Japanese American voices during this period. The narrative's sparse language mirrors the characters' emotional repression and societal marginalization.

Symbolism in the Novel

- **The Emperor:** Represents authority and the distant power imposing internment.
- **The Train:** Symbolizes forced displacement and the journey into uncertainty.
- **The Desert Landscape:** Reflects isolation and hardship endured in the camps.
- **Photographs and Letters:** Emblematic of memory, loss, and the attempt to preserve identity.

Literary Style and Narrative Structure

Julie Otsuka employs a minimalist and poetic prose style in *when the emperor was divine*,

characterized by short, declarative sentences and a restrained emotional tone. This style effectively conveys the stark realities of internment without overt sentimentality.

Multiple Perspectives

The novel is divided into sections that shift focus among family members, providing a multifaceted view of events. This narrative technique enhances the reader's empathy and understanding of the collective and individual experience.

Chronological Progression

The story follows a chronological order, beginning with the family's eviction, moving through their time in the camp, and concluding with their return home. This progression underscores the temporal impact of internment on identity and belonging.

Significance of the Title

The title *when the emperor was divine* holds deep symbolic meaning within the novel. It references the period when Japan's emperor was revered as a divine figure, a concept that informed Japanese nationalism and was exploited during World War II. For Japanese Americans, this symbol became associated with suspicion and persecution in the United States.

The title also reflects the tension between cultural heritage and forced assimilation. It evokes the irony of internees being seen as enemy subjects despite their American citizenship. The phrase encapsulates the novel's exploration of loyalty, identity, and the impact of war on marginalized communities.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Since its publication, *when the emperor was divine* has received widespread critical acclaim for its poignant portrayal of Japanese American internment. Scholars and readers praise Julie Otsuka's ability to illuminate a lesser-known chapter of American history with sensitivity and literary artistry.

The novel has become a significant work in Asian American literature and is frequently studied in academic settings. Its contribution to raising awareness about internment and its aftermath has cemented its place as an important cultural and historical text.

- Recognition for highlighting historical injustices
- Inclusion in educational curricula on American history and literature
- Influence on subsequent works addressing themes of displacement and identity

- Enduring relevance in discussions about civil rights and racial profiling

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'When the Emperor Was Divine'?

The main theme of 'When the Emperor Was Divine' is the Japanese American internment during World War II and its impact on a family, exploring themes of identity, loss, and resilience.

Who is the author of 'When the Emperor Was Divine'?

The author of 'When the Emperor Was Divine' is Julie Otsuka.

How does 'When the Emperor Was Divine' portray the experience of Japanese American families during World War II?

The novel portrays the experience through the perspective of a family forcibly removed from their home and placed in an internment camp, highlighting their struggles, emotional trauma, and the loss of dignity and normalcy.

Why is the title 'When the Emperor Was Divine' significant?

The title refers to the period when Japan's emperor was considered divine, symbolizing the cultural and political tensions that led to the internment of Japanese Americans and the conflict of identity faced by the characters.

What narrative style is used in 'When the Emperor Was Divine'?

The novel uses a sparse, poetic narrative style with multiple perspectives, often focusing on individual family members' experiences to convey the emotional depth of the internment experience.

Additional Resources

1. *Farewell to Manzanar*

This memoir by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston recounts her experiences as a young Japanese American girl imprisoned in the Manzanar internment camp during World War II. The book offers a personal and poignant perspective on the challenges faced by Japanese American families, exploring themes of identity, resilience, and the struggle to reclaim dignity after injustice.

2. *Snow Falling on Cedars*

Written by David Guterson, this novel intertwines a murder trial with the lingering effects of

Japanese American internment in the Pacific Northwest. It delves into issues of racial prejudice, memory, and the search for justice, all set against a beautifully described natural backdrop.

3. *When the Emperor Was Divine*

By Julie Otsuka, this novel follows a Japanese American family forcibly relocated to an internment camp during World War II. Through sparse yet evocative prose, it captures the emotional impact of displacement, loss, and the struggle to maintain identity under oppressive circumstances.

4. *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*

Jamie Ford's novel tells the story of a Chinese American boy and a Japanese American girl in 1940s Seattle, against the backdrop of Japanese internment. It explores themes of friendship, cultural conflict, and the enduring effects of wartime prejudice.

5. *Inside Out & Back Again*

This novel in verse by Thanhha Lai tells the story of a young Vietnamese girl who immigrates to the United States after the Vietnam War, offering a perspective on displacement that resonates with stories of internment and forced relocation. It highlights themes of adaptation, resilience, and the search for belonging.

6. *No-No Boy*

John Okada's novel focuses on a Japanese American man who refuses to serve in the U.S. military during World War II, leading to social ostracism and internal conflict. The book explores the complexities of identity, loyalty, and the consequences of resistance during a time of national hysteria.

7. *The Bracelet*

By Yoshiko Uchida, this children's book is based on the author's own experiences in an internment camp. It tells the story of a young girl who loses her treasured bracelet during the evacuation, symbolizing the loss and hope endured by Japanese American families.

8. *American Knees*

By Shawn Wong, this novel deals with the Asian American experience post-World War II, touching on themes of cultural identity and generational conflict. While not exclusively about internment, it provides insight into the broader Asian American struggle for acceptance and self-definition.

9. *Obasan*

Joy Kogawa's novel centers on a Japanese Canadian girl's experiences during and after the internment of Japanese Canadians in World War II. It is a powerful exploration of memory, trauma, and the quest for justice in the face of government-sanctioned discrimination.

[When The Emperor Was Divine](#)

When The Emperor Was Divine

Related Articles

- [when god was a woman](#)
- [why did they kill sasha off family business 1](#)

- [womens history scavenger hunt](#)

[Back to Home](#)