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No No Boy and the Death of Identity

It is said that men die twice; once when the physical body dies, and finally when they are remembered for the last time. In *No No Boy*, John Okada describes another death: the loss of identity. After serving two years in prison for refusing to enlist in World War II, Ichiro Yamada finds himself back home not knowing who he is anymore. The novel follows Ichiro as he wrestles with what it means to be Japanese American and if there is any hope for his future. He visits old friends and family and finds the novel explores their postwar struggles as well. A consistent theme of the novel is death, both literal and figurative, with characters described as half-dead, close to dead, already dead, or even reborn. Multiple characters die during the short time period that the book spans. Through these deaths, Okada tries to portray how he feels about the identity of Japanese Americans as a whole.

Okada's consistent use of death throughout *No No Boy* represents the loss of identity, particularly the loss of the Japanese identity that Nisei inherited from their parents that the characters struggle with throughout the novel. Each person Ichiro bonds with represents a different identity crisis and a different perspective of death. Through these perspectives and through these deaths, Okada builds up the loss of inherited identity as a kind of death, and this death, both the fight against it and desire for it, is the main conflict Ichiro faces.

Death 1. Bobbie Kumasaka

After reacquainting with his family, Ichiro and his mother visit the Kumasakas, another Japanese family, to celebrate Ichiro coming home. Ichiro is surprised to find out that their son Bobbie enlisted in the army and died on the battlefield. Later, Ichiro's mother says that she didn't tell him about his death because it was unimportant. "It was not the boy but the mother who is also the son and it is she who is to blame and it is she who is dead because the son did not know" (Chapter 2). Because Bobbie's mother couldn't stop him from joining the American forces, it was her fault that he had died, and further, she was dead because she had failed in keeping him loyal to Japan. With Bobbie, we see the idea of being dead while alive, because of a failure to stay attached to Japan and detached from America.

Death 2. Kenji

Ichiro's mother has similar feelings about Kenji, Ichiro's friend who enlisted in the army. The war took Kenji's leg, an injury that eventually led to his death. Kenji and Ichiro are described as "two extremes, the Japanese who was more American than most Americans [...], and the other who was neither Japanese nor American" (Chapter 4), further emphasizing Ichiro's lack of identity. Kenji is almost the opposite of Ichiro, and Ichiro wishes he could trade places with him. He wanted to trade away his frustration with what he did for an infected leg that could soon kill him. This shows how Ichiro feels he is already dead, because he has lost his identity, and has no hope in figuring out who he could be. Of course, the trade isn't possible, but the

kindness Kenji shows Ichiro throughout the book is a key contributor to the hope he feels at the end of the story. With Kenji, we see the opposite of Ichiro, but both still dead in different ways.

Death 3. Mrs. Yamada

During the Kominka movement in Japan, when the empire attempted to expand and assimilate Korea and Taiwan, Korean mothers played an important role in assimilation. Korean language was prohibited, and Korean mothers raised their children to speak in Japanese dialects, not Korean ones. Ichiro's mother fought against this very thing happening with her children in America. She stayed loyal to Japan and refused to learn English or become any closer to the country. The war only heightened her patriotism, which evolved into hysteria, believing that Japan was the real victor.

After her death, it feels as though a weight has been lifted from Ichiro and his father. With her death, they could finally learn to embrace America. Where the Korean mothers in Japan were forced into making their children Japanese, Mrs. Yamada fought to keep her children from becoming American. Ichiro was being pulled on one side by the woman who raised him and on the other side by the country he was raised in; "because one is not born in America and raised in America and taught in America and one does not speak and swear and drink and smoke and play and fight and see and hear in America among Americans in American streets and houses without becoming American and loving it" (Chapter 1). It wasn't until her death that this tension ended, letting Ichiro see the world with new eyes and the ability to find his own identity. With Mrs. Yamada, we see death enabling Ichiro to let go of his past identity. Her death was Ichiro's death, the death Ichiro had been chasing; letting go of the Japanese part of his identity, his mother's identity, to build a new one.

Death 4. Gary

After his mother's death, Ichiro begins looking for work and is led to an old friend, another no-no boy named Gary. He finds purpose in life through painting and feels reborn; "I died in prison. And when I came back to life, all that really mattered for me was to make a painting" (Chapter 10). Where imprisonment broke Ichiro, Gary found new meaning in life, new identity. Though their experiences are different, Gary may serve as a glimpse into Ichiro's near future since Gary was released from prison earlier. While talking to Gary, Ichiro remembers the kindness shown to him by the man who offered him a job working with Gary, the man in Portland who offered a good wage, and he thinks about Kenji and Emi. At this point, Ichiro begins to realize the world isn't so bleak, and there may be hope for him after all. With Gary, we see that it's possible to go through what Ichiro went through and still find identity and passion in the end.

Throughout the book, Ichiro is shaped by the deaths of those around him, eventually being able to find a glimmer of hope by the end of the book. He begins to understand what it means for him to embrace America and rebuild his identity that was destroyed by his mother and the war. Through the framework of death, we see how Japanese American identity was brought into the spotlight during the war and just like how many lost their lives to the war, many lost their identity as well. Okada's use of death shows how he feels about Japanese American identity and the seemingly futile struggle of trying to balance the two sides; it can't be reconciled without a rebirth and a renewed understanding of what it can mean to be both Japanese and American.