



A Concept Analysis for

## So Far from the Bamboo Grove

By Yoko Kawashima Watkins



### Organizational Patterns:

This book is divided into 11 fairly long chapters of about 15-20 pages. There is also a map inside the front cover of Korea, the USSR, and China. It shows the course of the railway system and the location of the larger cities that are pertinent to the novel. After this map, there is a forward written by Jean Fritz that introduces the novel and gives some basic general information about what was going on during this time. There is a dedication in the front of the novel to “Ko” which is Yoko’s sister who helps her survive during this time. The story takes place in 1945 during the beginning of World War II. The novel is autobiographical and relays the story of Yoko Kawashima and her struggles as a Japanese girl in North Korea during this tumultuous time. The narration changes from first person to third person throughout the novel. All of the chapters with the exclusion of 4, 6, and 11 are all narrated in the first person, from Yoko’s point of view. The chapters specifically mentioned above are all narrated through 3<sup>rd</sup> person. These chapters are about Hideyo, Yoko’s brother who is almost killed in the factory where he is working and must find his own way back to his family. These chapters follow him on his quest to reunite with his family. The book starts with the whole family together, seen through Yoko’s eyes. At the end, it is the same story. The family is together and once again Yoko becomes the narrator of all of the events now that Hideyo has come home.

### Issues Related to the Study of Literature:

#### Theme:

This is a bildungsroman and captures the personal and emotional development and maturation of the 11-year-old narrator. This is a story about a little girl’s fight for survival in the middle of a violent and gruesome war. The underlying message of this story is to inform people about the horrible events that occurred on the other side of World War II. This novel gives a much different perspective than most students in the United States have come in contact with.

There are other themes woven throughout the novel also. Sacrifice and love for family members is also a very important theme. Yoko’s mother dies of exhaustion and starvation because she gave all she could for her children. Yoko’s sister also makes huge sacrifices for Yoko so that she can go to school, have food to eat, etc. She makes her clothing and becomes her mother, protecting her from the harmful things of the world. The two girls work together to survive without their parents. This says that if you work together, and work as hard as you can, you will survive.

**Setting:** The setting of the novel is extremely important to the plot. It is set in northern Korea and Japan. If the novel had been set in the United States it would have been very similar to American retellings of World War II. The fact that it is from the perspective of

the Japanese makes it unique. Yoko lives with her family in northern Korea near the border with China. On their journey back to Japan, they go through much of Korea, including Pusan, which is the port that they go to in order to reach Japan. From there, they lived in Kyoto, one of the few places that survived the bombing.

**Foreshadowing:** There isn't much foreshadowing in the novel. The events take place through the eyes of Yoko and so much of what happens comes by surprise, although there are a few smaller instances. It is apparent that Yoko's mother is hiding something in her "wrapping cloth" although no one really knows what it is until the end. Yoko notices this by observing the following, "Mother did a strange thing. She emptied her big wrapping cloth and took the cloth with her to the toilet. Then she came back and told Ko to put back all the humble items (p. 109)." We know that there is something in there that is important but do not find out until later that her mother had smuggled a large amount of money all the way from northern Korea (p.133).

**Point of View:**

The majority of the story is told from Yoko's point of view. Therefore, the Point of View is mostly first person. As mentioned before in Organizational Patterns, the point of view changes in three chapters. In these three chapters, we have a third person narration.

**Tone:**

The tone is very important to this story also. The novel is told from the perspective of a naïve, 11-year-old girl, and because of this, the reader is able to understand the plot from the innocent eyes of a young girl. This also helps with credibility because she has no reason to lie. She is simply stating what is happening and doesn't seem to be as biased as an adult would be because she does not understand the complexities and "the why" of the war. Much of the time we can see through Yoko's naivety and know what is going on, although, she does not know.

Example: "Suddenly I felt warmth on my back. I whispered to Mother that the women had wet her pants. (p.35)" The women is actually giving birth to her child and her water had just broken.

**Irony:**

There are only a few subtle ironies in this novel. One of the most obvious is the fact that Yoko's mother dies after they get to their destination. She went through so much to bring her daughters in to Japan, only to die once she gets there (p. 122). Another sad irony is when they are all on the train and the guards have stopped it and are taking an inventory of the people on it. The deaths of the other passengers on the train ensure the lives of Yoko, Ko, and their mother (p. 38). Also, it is a sad irony that the pregnant mother has her child and does not have any milk to feed it. Then when she finally does, the baby is dead (p.33-4). These are a few of the ironies of the story. All of them are sad and unfortunate but are important to the story. They show what a desperate situation these girls are really in.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work (Areas teacher could include and address):**

- Subjection to racial prejudice
- Influenced by the outcome of a war
- Witnessed an act of violence
- Ever traveled a long distance without knowing where they were going
- Started school in a new place where they were different from everyone else
- Mother died when they were young
- Siblings acted as a parent because of some unfortunate event
- The loss or unknown whereabouts of a loved one
- Has had to struggle because of a lack of money
- Interested in what wars do to civilians
- Feelings of hopelessness in humanity
- Starting over in a new place
- Interested in the treatment of women in different countries
- Strong devotion and love for family members

**Vocabulary:**

This book does not have an extensively difficult vocabulary and is very easy to read. This is partly a consequence of the way it comes in part because of an 11-year-old narrator voice. There are a number of Japanese and Korean names, as well as some war vocabulary that students might have difficulty with if they are not familiar with the basic war vocabulary. Although there are many foreign names, there is not much confusion because Yoko the narrator uses a lot of abbreviations. Her sister is referred to as “Ko”, etc. However last names like Kawashima and Matsumura might be more difficult. Most of the words in this novel are very basic however; some of the words that might need to be reviewed are the following: gangplank (p90), rucksack (p6), mess kits (p126), chemise (p 49), etc.

**Background Knowledge:**

There is a lot that can be done with this novel in regards to background knowledge. This is an excellent book to give readers a look in to the world of Japanese culture and history. It is obvious that students will need to know about World War II and what specifically was happening in Japan, Korea, and what was then the U.S.S.R.

Teachers can also help students to understand the novel better by teaching the class about the different clothing and customs of the aforementioned countries. These would include: the difference between a Korean soldier uniform and a Japanese uniform, the types of clothing that Yoko and her family put on to disguise themselves, traditional female Japanese / Korean dress, etc. Pictures would be very helpful in this situation. Students would also like to know what a “wrapping cloth” is and how it works. It has a significant part in the end of the story. They should also learn a little about the importance of tea and the tea ceremony in Japanese tradition.

**Implications for Students of Diversity:**

Students who come from diverse cultures or ethnicities may be able to relate personally to Yoko’s experiences. Her Japanese culture is brought out in many different ways. Her name, the way she honors her ancestors, the way people are referred to within her family, the food she eats, her clothing, the importance of education, etc. Yoko is brought to a different country where she is considered different than everyone else because of her circumstances. She is mocked and

teased by her fellow classmates because she is different and very poor. Students in the real classroom might relate personally to this because they do not fit in with “the norm”. They eat different things for lunch than their peers, or they look different, or they treat older people differently, etc. Although this is a story about war and what it did to the people in those countries, it is also a story about how a young girl survives through a very hard time and starts a new life. In the end, everything works out. This story would be good for those students because they have probably felt the struggle of trying to make it in a new place and to see that this little girl, despite all the obstacles, made it. It is an inspiring story.

### **Gender Issues:**

There are a lot of gender issues in this novel. From the very beginning there is an obvious difference between the way males and females are treated. The men are in charge of the household and provide for the women. They have a very strong sense of honor to their families. The women are more subservient to the men are in charge of cooking and taking care of the household and matters of education. This would be an excellent topic of conversation in the class. We could bring up the following questions: How are things different now? What about in the United States? Have these roles changed?

The fact that Yoko and Ko are female is very important to the story. Because they are female they must be extremely careful about everything they do. They have to disguise themselves as boys to avoid being raped by the soldiers. They must also go to the bathroom standing up so no one will know that they are female. They also cut off their long hair to keep up with their “boyish” appearances. Throughout the novel there are very tense instances between men and women. There is also an occasional mention of prostitution, etc. These issues must be addressed in the classroom very carefully because they are important but must not be taken out of context.

### **The Central Question / Enduring Issue:**

Above all else, this book is about having courage and survival. Yoko is just a naïve child who grows up in a bamboo grove in northern Korea and then suddenly her life is broken apart. She is forced to leave her home, possessions, and all she has ever known, to travel long distances on foot and over water to Japan. She goes through a number of trials. She almost dies of thirst and hunger, her mother dies right in front of her, her brother and father are missing, and she is mocked by her classmates, but she still never loses hope. In the end, everything works out and she survives. The trials that she goes through are very uncharacteristic of an 11-year-old girl, but somehow she wins the battle. The forward to this story further emphasizes this issue when it says,

“When this book was accepted for publication, a writer friend told Yoko that now she would be competing with other writers. Yoko said, no, she would not compete with anyone for anything. “I competed with life and death when young,” she said. “And I won.” Here is the story of her victory.”

This is also a very good story to use during an interdisciplinary unit because it is so intertwined with World War II. It could definitely be used to show the complexity of war and a different perspective on it than what students usually receive in American education. This novel

in general could be used for many different units because it has characteristics of a bildungsroman and therefore students will innately relate to it.

### **Research Issues / Project Ideas:**

1. Research World War II. Find out what exactly was going on in 1945 in northern Korea to get some background information on why Yoko and her family must leave their homes. Have students pick a country that was affected by WWII and write a paper on how the lives of civilians changed during this time. Or...they could write a story about one day in the lives of a civilian in one of those countries.
2. Research clothing styles, traditions, and cultures of Japan. Have students find pictures of the different uniforms, clothing, etc. Talk about the importance of the tea ceremony. Maybe show a clip of "Mulan" where they do the ceremony. Have students think about creating their own culture. What would your civilization be like? What ceremonies would it have? What would they wear? Make sure the styles fit location they live. Take in to consideration humidity, temperature, and months of the year.
3. Talk about the importance of Buddhism in the novel (if this is appropriate). And the significance of ancestor worship. Have the students do a journal write. "How does your family honor your ancestors?"
4. So Far from the Bamboo Grove: What is in a title? Have students brainstorm about the title of the novel. Why is it called this? Have students write in their journal. "If I was forced to leave my home in the same circumstances, what would the title of my novel be called? Why?" Examples could be...So Far from my Internet Connection...or...So Far from my Big Mac and Fries...etc.
5. Talk about the food from the book. Make rice balls filled with Kim chi and have the students try it. Have the students bring in food from their own culture. (If this is allowed) Have everyone try the different foods.
6. Talk about the Japanese school system. Why is it so important for Yoko to attend school when they don't even have a house? Etc. Have students research different parts of the world and the school system they use. Do they go to school on Sundays? What do they do about college, etc?
7. After talking about the climax of the story, have students write the story of their most intense / scary moment from their childhood. Do it in using a voice of an 11 year old. Do not use any words that are larger than 6 letters long.

### **Informational / Functional Texts:**

1. Articles from the 1940's about WWII
2. Maps
3. Pictures of northern Korea and Japan: housing, scenery, people, etc.

4. Guest speaker about what it was like during WWII
5. Find other texts written by civilians during this time period
6. Have students read other short stories about WWII from the perspective of a child from other countries. One good example of this is “The Island on Bird Street”.

\*See the Annotated Bibliography for more information on additional texts.

\*\*Novel edition used for this unit is the following:

Kawashima, Yoko Watkins. So Far from the Bamboo Grove. New York: Beechtree, 1986.

