

## Underlying Themes of “History Project”

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s poem “History Project” from her book *Iep Jāltok* describes what she learned from her high school history project about nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. The central message of this poem is that the United States fails to acknowledge the harm they caused the Marshallese, even though many residents are obviously suffering.

Deeper messages are hidden under the overarching concept of the poem. Jetñil-Kijiner mentions the mistreatment that the Marshallese face in stanzas 18-19:

*Goats and pigs were left on naval ships as test subjects.*

*Thousands*

*of letters flew in from America*

*protesting*

*animal abuse.*

For research purposes, domestic animals were left on military ships while nuclear bombs were detonated. Americans were concerned about the lives of these animals. They believed that the goats and pigs were treated inhumanely. In contrast, no one fought for the lives of the Marshallese.

Jetñil-Kijiner quotes American leaders in stanza 3: “*90,000 people are out there. Who / gives a damn?*” This solidifies the idea that the Marshallese are valued less than a bunch of animals. Not even people of authority cared about the lives of residents that were put in danger.

Figurative language describes the physical effects that the Marshallese experienced after being exposed to nuclear waste. Jetñil-Kijiner uses a simile in stanza 5: “*I glance at a photograph / of a boy, peeled skin / arms legs suspended / like a puppet.*” This simile has a double meaning.

The boy is compared to a lifeless puppet to show that his injuries left him immobile or maybe even killed him. He represents all of the Marshallese lives that were lost from nuclear testing. In addition to being lifeless, puppets are controlled by puppeteers. Therefore, the boy may also represent how the Marshallese were manipulated by Americans who used their land.

This idea is also evident in the use of irony. Throughout her poem, Jetñil-Kijiner uses the phrases “for the good of mankind” and “*God will thank you* they told us.” She repeats these lines to replicate how Americans convinced her people to believe that their sacrifices were worth it. It is ironic how America justified their actions by claiming that it was for “the good of mankind,” but they didn’t care about the harm they put on the Marshallese. Hurting other humans does not benefit anyone.

Jetñil-Kijiner uses a simile in stanza 6 to describe birth defects: “[J]elly babies / tiny beings with no bones / skin—red as tomatoes.” She successfully creates a gruesome image for readers to visualize, appealing to pathos to emphasize the brutality that the Marshallese faced. This stresses the struggles that nuclear waste brought these people.

Stanzas 26-29 illustrates what Jetñil-Kijiner experienced at the History Day competition. She reveals that the judges did not get the point of her project. She ends the poem with the line “and I lost.” This could mean several things. There’s the direct meaning: she lost the competition. It also hints at the idea that she lost the fight to enlighten these judges about her people’s past. This implies that at a larger scale, the suffering of the Marshallese are left unheard.

Is this why the Marshallese allowed Americans to use their land as a nuclear test site? Were they aware of what the world thought about them, making them feel like they couldn’t fight back? Did they feel powerless in the grasp of a large and powerful country? Do they feel like following Western advice will allow them to fit in with the rest of the world? Maybe they think

becoming “heroes” will make them seem more competent and worthy of living among other cultures. Maybe they feel like it was something they had to do to keep the peace with America.

Nonetheless, Jetñil-Kijiner successfully conveys her messages through her use of imagery, figurative language, and diction. Her honest examples of the effects of nuclear testing made her poem powerful, which helps readers understand the seriousness of the issues that her people continue to deal with. Nuclear waste on the Marshall Islands is far from decaying. Jetñil-Kijiner preaches the struggles that the Marshallese face to this day in desperation of breaking the trend of being left unheard and feeling hopeless.

Work Cited

Jetñil-Kijiner, Kathy. "History Project." *Iep Jāltok*. The University of Arizona Press, 2017. pp.

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