

Bloom's Literature

How to Write about Joy Luck Club

Reading to Write

Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), quickly earned her both a large fan base and much critical praise. It became a sort of cultural phenomenon, translated into many languages, including Chinese, taught in classrooms across the country, and made into a popular movie, which Tan coproduced and for which she cowrote the screenplay. The novel centers on four Chinese immigrants and their American-born daughters. The women have formed a Joy Luck Club, which meets every week for the purpose of sharing and validating the women's experiences and giving the members of the group a sense of community. Suyuan Woo founded this San Francisco group based on a similar gathering she had begun back in wartime China. In the following passage Suyuan justifies the existence of the original Joy Luck Club, an endeavor that some criticized for indulging in joy while so much trauma and pain surrounded them:

It's not that we had no heart or eyes for pain. We were all afraid. We all had our miseries. But to despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable. How much can you wish for a favorite warm coat that hangs in the closet of a house that burned down with your mother and father inside of it? How long can you see in your mind arms and legs hanging from telephone wires and starving dogs running down the streets with half-chewed hands dangling from their jaws? What was worse, we asked among ourselves, to sit and wait for our own deaths with proper somber faces? Or to choose our own happiness? (25)

Acknowledging the public outcry against a social gathering focusing on luck and joy during such a chaotic and brutal time and the assumptions by some community members that the women of the Joy Luck Club must either be emotionally unbalanced or somehow insulated from the pain and loss surrounding them, Suyuan explains just how erroneous these conclusions were. The Joy Luck members were in no way ignorant of the pain occurring around them; they suffered their own fears and "miseries," just like everyone else. Suyuan suggests that it was the very intensity of their suffering that made it imperative for the women to somehow cut themselves off from the pain they had experienced in order to survive.

Suyuan conveys the severity of the situation by introducing a loss many readers will instantly connect with and then illustrating how small that loss actually is compared with the traumas that she and others like her faced. When Suyuan speaks about wishing for a favorite coat that was lost in a fire, we feel a sympathetic response for the loss of something special; however, when she continues to describe the coat as the one that "hangs in the closet of a house that burned down with your mother and father inside of it," she takes us into a world in which our powers of empathy fail us, a world in which the losses are not simply of a special garment or even a childhood home but of an entire family. She then makes even this loss seem almost inconsequential by following it with an especially graphic and horrific description of "starving dogs running down the streets with half-chewed hands dangling from their jaws," a scene emblematic of the breakdown of the very fabric of society. Suyuan introduces this scene with the phrase "How long can you see in your mind," revealing that she is recounting not simply a scene that she once witnessed firsthand but one that has obviously replayed itself continuously in her mind. The progression of the images in this scene—from comfort in the form of a warm coat to the loss of home and family by fire to gruesome dismemberment and a reversal of the hierarchy of human and animal—suggests a world rapidly descending into chaos. Suyuan's response, however, rather than progressive, is direct, sudden, final, and rational. There is a limit, Suyuan suggests, to how much suffering and trial the mind can take. As long as we are masters of our own minds, she implies, we ultimately have the choice of how to confront even the most horrendous of circumstances.

The Joy Luck women feel that they have two choices, to try to stay connected to the violence and trauma that surrounds them as their critics would have them do, which would mean, in Suyuan's words, that the women would simply "sit and wait for [their] own deaths with proper somber faces." Alternatively, they could "choose [their] own happiness," cutting themselves off, at least for a period each week, from reality and redefining their world as one of hope and happiness.

An examination of this passage provides us with a glimpse into Suyuan's world and the processes by which she copes with trauma, and it can inspire us to ask further questions that might ultimately lead to an essay topic or thesis. You might, for instance, examine the rest of the novel for the ramifications of shielding or cutting oneself off from individual losses. The mind might only be

able to experience horrible things for so long, but for how long can it look away? Alternatively, you might examine the way that other characters handle trauma, or you might compare the origins and function of the Joy Luck Club of China to Suyuan's new version in the United States. Whatever line of inquiry you decide to pursue, you will want to identify several relevant passages and bring deliberate attention to Tan's carefully crafted language in order to arrive at an insightful claim to make in your essay.

Topics and Strategies

The following topic suggestions are designed to help spark your thinking and to help you along in the planning process of your essay. Avoid approaching them as test questions in which you move from beginning to end, carefully answering all of the subsections. Instead, pick and choose the parts of the topics that seem interesting and relevant. Combine topics, if you wish, or use a subject or element mentioned briefly in a topic suggestion to come up with a new topic of your own. Whatever subject you end up selecting, remember that the key to a successful essay is thorough planning. You must spend time rereading the text, doing research, and taking notes. The more attention you pay to this stage of the writing process, the easier writing the actual essay will be and the better the quality of the argument and evidence presented in the essay.

Themes

The Joy Luck Club offers a complicated and richly nuanced examination of two broad themes: the intersection of ethnicity, cultural heritage, and identity and also the relationships between mothers and daughters, which are themselves profoundly affected by cultural differences. There is too much to be said about either of these topics in one essay. If you choose to tackle either of them, the key to success will be to narrow your focus to something more manageable. If you choose to write about ethnicity, cultural heritage, and identity, for example, you might choose to concentrate on how the Joy Luck mothers acclimated to life in the United States or analyze to what extent their Chinese background and ethnicity shapes the lives of the American-born daughters. If you write about mother/daughter relationships, you might wish to narrow your focus to one of the specific parent/child pairs, or you might wish to write about how the mothers as a group regard their daughters or vice versa.

Sample Topics:

1. Ethnicity, cultural heritage, and identity: According to the novel, the Joy Luck mothers wanted their children to have "American circumstances" with "Chinese character." They wanted their children to think and behave in a traditionally Chinese manner while enjoying all of the opportunities and freedoms available to them as Americans. The mothers, however, feel that their daughters have turned out to be much more American than they had hoped, leading them to fear that their daughters are losing something of great importance: their Chinese heritage and their connection to their pasts, including their own mothers' stories. What is the novel ultimately trying to say about the nexus of ethnicity, cultural heritage, and identity?

According to Chinese belief, "Your mother is in your bones" (Huntley 63). In other words, there is a fundamental interconnectedness among generations. As An-mei puts it: "I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way" (215). Critic E. D. Huntley writes that, "Unfortunately, [the] American daughters do not recognize a symbiotic relationship between mothers and daughters; these second-generation Americans see only that their mothers appear to be trying to live through their children" (63). Additionally, the daughters resist following the goals and paths that their families dream up for them. Huntley continues: "Because they have been schooled in the tradition of individuality, the daughters resist their mothers' attempts to define their lives or to participate vicariously in their accomplishments" (63).

Go back to the novel with these thoughts in mind. Do you think the mothers' expectations that their daughters have "Chinese character" and "American circumstances" are realistic or even possible? Why or why not? Do you think the daughters have little or no Chinese in them as some of the mothers lament, or is there a Chinese foundation somewhere inside them, as Suyuan insisted, that will some day rise to the surface? What, according to the novel, are the most important factors of identity formation? Is cultural background, ethnicity, or current environment the most powerful factor?

2. Mother/daughter relationships: One of the most poignant aspects of *The Joy Luck Club* is the nature of the

tense and complicated relationships between the mothers and their daughters. They all seem to be good, decent people who feel genuine affection for each other, but somehow misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and disappointments characterize their relationships. Write an essay in which you analyze the mother/daughter relationships of *The Joy Luck Club*, explaining their difficulties and tensions and evaluating whether any of the pairs seem to be on the path to a more constructive kind of interaction.

For this essay, you might look at all of the mother/daughter pairs, or you might restrict your study to one or two of them. No matter what specific approach you adopt, you will want to pay particular attention to the discrepancies between what the women want their relationships to be and what they, in fact, are. How can you explain the way these relationships are continually thwarted despite the best intentions of the women? Are there any ways that these relationships could be structured or managed so that they would work better, or are they fundamentally flawed?

3. Community: Suyuan begins the first Joy Luck Club in China during the Sino-Japanese War. She tells many stories to Jing-mei about this original club, including the way that the members feasted together on the meager food that was available, played mah jong for luck, and told happy, funny stories late into the night. After arriving in San Francisco in 1949, Suyuan begins another Joy Luck Club, this one lasting for decades, at least until the 1980s when the novel is set. Obviously, the women benefit from this interaction. What exactly are these benefits? What need does this group fill in these women's lives?

Think about both clubs, the original one in China and the new one in San Francisco. How are the two incarnations of the club similar and different? How does the San Francisco club evolve during its long existence? Why do you think it continues to exist? What role does it play in the families' lives? Examine the differences in the circumstances of the mothers, when they were young, and the daughters. Is it possible that the existence of the Joy Luck Club in one generation makes its existence in the next generation unnecessary?

What did the daughters think about the Joy Luck Club as they were growing up? What do they think of it now as adults? None of the daughters are eager to become a member of such a club. Do they have different needs from their mothers, or are they simply having these needs fulfilled in a different way?

4. Trauma: We learn through the course of the novel of the major traumatic events in the lives of Suyuan, Lindo, Ying-ying, and An-mei. Many of these involve in some way the loss of a child. Suyuan is forced to abandon her twin baby girls as she retreats from Kweilin. Lindo loses a 16-year-old son to a car accident, while An-mei loses her four-year-old son, Bing, to a drowning accident. Ying-ying aborts her first child after her husband leaves her for another woman. How do these women handle these traumatic events, and how do these events shape them?

Think about the traumas endured by these women. How does each woman process and deal with everything she has endured? Does any woman's method seem to be preferable to the others'? Have they told their husbands and their daughters about these tragedies? Have they told one another? What are the consequences of these decisions about sharing or withholding these formative experiences? You might also consider whether the loss of a child functions as a metaphor in this novel. What might the lost child stand for?

5. Masculinity: Because all of the eight main characters of *The Joy Luck Club* are female, we have a strong tendency to think about what the novel has to tell us about femininity and the role of women in society. While that is an invaluable line of inquiry, it is also worthwhile to ask how the novel constructs masculinity. According to *The Joy Luck Club*, what does it mean to be a man?

Jot down all of the male characters in the novel and what you know about them. What patterns can you discern? What do you know about Joy Luck fathers? What were their relationships like with their wives? With their daughters? What about the daughters' romantic partners: What sort of masculinity do they embody? Is it a model similar to their fathers? How rooted in culture and time does masculinity seem to be? How is what it means to be a man in 1930s China different from what it means to be man in the United States in the 1990s? What is similar and what is different, and what does this tell us about the way that Tan perceives the role of men in modern society?

Character

The Joy Luck Club is populated by eight complicated and fascinating women, any of whom would provide enough material for a thorough character analysis. Instead of focusing on just one of the characters, however, you could choose a mother/daughter pair, comparing and contrasting two of the mothers or two of the daughters, or consider all four daughters or all four mothers as a group. In any case, after you have recorded all of the information you know about your character(s) and analyzed her dialogue, inner thoughts, and relationships with other characters, you will want to spend some time thinking about the reason that Amy Tan included a character exactly like this in the novel. How does your character help to develop the overall themes and meanings of the entire work?

Sample Topics:

1. Jing-mei Woo: Jing-mei's voice opens the novel as she tells us about her mother's recent death and her father's request that she take her mother's place as the fourth member of the Joy Luck Club meeting. Jing-mei also closes the novel with the description of her trip to China to meet her sisters, the babies that her mother had been forced to abandon when leaving Kweilin all those years ago. While the other women each tell two stories, Jing-mei's voice speaks to us four times, once in each section of the novel. Why do you think Jing-mei's narrative takes up such a disproportionately large percentage of the novel's space? Would you say she functions as the "main character" or the most important protagonist in this novel? Why or why not?

Begin by recording everything you know about Jing-mei. What kind of a person is she? What was her childhood like? What is she like as an adult? What do you think her mother means at the New Year's dinner when, after Jing-mei tries to pick the worst crab so that her mother can have a good one, Suyuan says to her "Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different" (208). Does Jing-mei think differently from everyone else, especially from the other daughters? Think about what she has in common with them and how she is different. Then, trace the connections among Jing-mei and the other members of the Joy Luck Club and their daughters and think about the way that Jing-mei's story and particularly the recent loss of her mother intersects with and influences the lives of all of these other women. Finally, also consider why Tan chose to begin and end the novel with the voice of one of the daughters instead of the mothers. What does this choice, and her choice of Jing-mei in particular, tell us about the overarching themes and meanings of the novel?

2. Suyuan Woo: When the novel opens, we learn that Jing-mei's mother, Suyuan, has just died. As such, Suyuan is the only main character in the novel who does not get to speak in her own voice. Analyze and evaluate the role that Suyuan, in memory and in her palpable absence, plays in the novel.

What do you know about Suyuan? What was her life like in China, and what was it like after she immigrated to America? What were her innermost hopes and fears? How important was Suyuan to the other characters? Once you have answered these questions, consider how we learn these things about Suyuan. Who seems to have known her best? Do you feel that we as readers come to know her as well as we do the other characters? Why or why not? Another way to think about Suyuan is to consider how her death affects the other characters. What events and journeys does it set, or help to set, into motion?

3. Lindo, An-mei, or Ying-ying: Analyze and evaluate one or more of the Joy Luck Club mothers.

Whether you are writing about one woman or all three, you will want to ask the following questions about each: What was her childhood like? What were the circumstances of her immigration to America? What has her life in America been like? Is her American life what she thought it would be? What are her regrets?

4. Rose, Waverly, or Lena: Analyze and evaluate the character of one or more of the daughters: Rose, Waverly, or Lena.

You will undoubtedly want to ask yourself similar questions no matter which daughter(s) you choose to concentrate on. You will want to know what her childhood was like, including what her parents expected of her and how much Chinese culture they expected her to absorb and retain. You will want to examine her narrative for clues as to what she considers the most formative events in her life and also examine her mother's personal history for information

about the family she grew up in and to glean any insight the mothers have into their daughters' characters. You will want to ascertain as well how self-aware the character is of her own strengths and limitations.

History and Context

Especially in the case of a novel like Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, a little historical research is an absolute necessity. A good portion of the novel takes place in 1940s China during a time of intense social upheaval. Many Westerners have little familiarity with Chinese history, and our studies of this period in particular tend to focus on the European theater of World War II. Based on Tan's text, you know that China was in crisis in the mid-20th century. Some background reading will help you to better understand the precise cultural and political climate in China at this time and to place Tan's characters Suyuan, Ying-ying, An-mei, and Lindo's experiences into context. Why was Japan invading China? How was China responding? What factions were at war within China at this time? What was the prevailing ideology and what new cultural movement was threatening that ideology? What was China's relationship with the rest of the world like at this time? You will also want to do some background reading on Chinese culture, beliefs, and traditions, paying particular attention to the closely related topics of the role of women in Chinese culture and its marriage traditions and laws. All of this context will help you to better understand the motivations of the Joy Luck Club mothers and give you a sense of the framework through which they see the world.

Sample Topics:

1. Warfare in China: Between 1928 and 1949, the Chinese people were faced with a civil war waged between the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist [NP]) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as an invasion by the Japanese, culminating in the Sino-Japanese War. Ultimately, the Chinese prevailed over the Japanese, and the CCP over the NP. The Chinese people not only experienced the violence and related horrors of war, but they also saw their countrymen fighting one another as their country struggled to define itself. How did living in this tumultuous period of Chinese history affect the Joy Luck women?

Begin by doing some historical research. You might start with chapters 6 and 7 of J. A. G. Roberts's *A Concise History of China*. What were the causes of the war with Japan and the civil war? What was life like for Chinese people during this time period? What does *The Joy Luck Club* tell you about its members' wartime experiences? How did these experiences change their relationship with their native land? Consider also the ways that Tan has chosen to present the war. According to your research, are her depictions realistic or has she altered the Chinese experience of the war in some way? Why did she choose either to be faithful in her rendering or to manipulate it in some way?

2. Role of women: Born in early 20th-century China, An-mei, Ying-ying, Suyuan, and Lindo grew up in a culture in which "the position of women—as daughters, wives, and mothers ... is markedly provisional, with their status and expendability fluctuating according to their families' economic circumstances, their ability to bear male heirs, and the proclivities of authority figures in their lives" (Heug 29). Their daughters, on the other hand, grew up in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, a society becoming increasingly invested during that time in demonstrating the value of women and insisting on their independence and equality to men. How did the different social and cultural environments—particularly in regard to women's social roles—in which the mothers and daughters grew up help to shape their identities and influence their relationships with one another?

Do some reading on the role of women in Chinese society. You might start with W. Scott Morton's *China: Its History and Culture*. You will also want to spend time reading about women's roles in the latter half of the 20th century in the United States and the various waves of the feminist movement that coursed through the United States in these decades. Based on the cultural understanding of women's roles in the environment in which they were raised, how do you think the Joy Luck mothers and daughters understand themselves and their relationships to their families? Do you think the daughters accept American beliefs completely, or are they influenced by their mothers' understanding of femininity and womanhood? How do they reconcile these two competing ideas?

3. Marriage in mid-20th-century China: Much of China's belief system is rooted in Confucianism, which emphasizes among other things the subservience of women to men. Although these "foundational beliefs came under attack by some Chinese thinkers of the early twentieth century, real change for women, including the outlawing of

prostitution, child marriages, the sale of brides, and concubinage" did not occur until the Maoist years, beginning in 1949 (Morton 271–72). Thus, the society the Joy Luck Club mothers fled from was one that still firmly embraced many of the Confucian ideas of the inferior nature of women. Write an essay in which you examine the romantic lives and marriages of Lindo, An-mei, Suyuan, and Ying-ying and discuss what the novel as a whole has to say about the role of women in marriage and the effect on women occupying that role in mid-20th-century China.

First, do some background reading on the traditional role of women in Chinese society, particularly in terms of marriage. Did romantic love play any part? How did it factor into marriage? What were the laws regarding marriage, divorce, and property ownership? How were marriages arranged? What was the goal of marriage? What was a woman's duty in marriage? What rights or protections did marriage give her? How was marriage in 1930s China similar to and different from marriage in the United States in the 1940s? Once you have some background knowledge, return to the novel and examine the romantic lives of Ying-ying, An-mei, Suyuan, and Lindo. How did they come to marry the men they married? What did they perceive to be their options in life in regard to marriage and economic independence? What role did they play in their marriages and domestic environments? Did moving to the United States change the way they saw themselves and their role as women?

Philosophy and Ideas

The Joy Luck Club is, in large part, the story of a group of women who grew up in a society that espouses a strong belief in supernatural forces and their power over the living. These individuals then relocate to the United States, the land that perhaps more than any other celebrates the supremacy of the individual. Opportunities for essays that focus on philosophy and ideas abound. You might, for instance, write about how these women manage to take control of their destinies within the framework of their stifling Chinese culture. Or you might elect to write about how they integrate themselves into American society to build successful lives and the extreme level of cultural and personal negotiation that this process entails.

Sample Topics:

1. Chinese beliefs and customs and individual agency: Analyze and evaluate what the novel has to say about the intersection of Chinese beliefs in supernatural forces and an individual's free will.

Begin with some research into traditional Chinese beliefs in regard to the supernatural. You might start with "Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements: Traditional Chinese Belief in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*" by Patricia Hamilton. How did Chinese belief in the supernatural affect individuals' everyday lives? How did these beliefs affect women, in particular, and their sense of control over their lives?

Return to the novel, rereading the sections set in China, and ask yourself how the Joy Luck mothers were able to take control of their destinies in a society that devalued the individual's, especially women's, personal desires. Examine An-mei's mother, for instance, who used the belief that spirits come back to collect debts at the New Year to her advantage, orchestrating the timing of her suicide to give An-mei and her brother some measure of protection. Look also at Lindo's story and examine the way that she used her husband's family's belief in the supernatural to orchestrate a way out of her arranged marriage. In each case the young woman manipulates the belief system of those around her in order to improve her own situation or the situation of those dearest to her. Did these women believe in the superstitions they were using to their own benefit? What were the risks they were assuming, practically, psychologically, and spiritually? What might this tell us about the position of women in Chinese culture as well as their relationship to traditional beliefs?

You might also want to think about the even more complicated question of what happens to these beliefs when the women immigrate to the United States? Do they impart them to their children? What happens to these beliefs when Christianity is introduced? Would you say that an individual has more or less control over his or her destiny in the traditional Chinese framework or in the Christian tradition?

2. Assimilation: What does *The Joy Luck Club* have to say about the nature of assimilation?

You will want to begin by asking yourself how An-mei, Suyuan, Ying-ying, and Lindo have changed since moving to

the United States. What parts of themselves did they need to transform in order to function successfully in their new society? Did they make these transformations intentionally, or did they simply happen automatically or gradually over time? You will also want to ask how the women feel about the compromises and adaptations they have made in order to get along in their new home. Certainly, the Joy Luck mothers have managed to achieve some level of success in the United States, but think about whether you would say that An-mei, Suyuan, Ying-ying, and Lindo have assimilated into American culture. What exactly does it mean to be assimilated? What does one gain by being so; what does one sacrifice? Do you think the women had assimilation as their goal? If not, how would you describe the way they wanted to integrate themselves into their new land, and do you think they were successful?

Form and Genre

You can, of course, examine the form and genre of any piece of literature, but *The Joy Luck Club* is an especially fruitful text for such investigations. For one thing, the text is narrated by seven different women, all of whom have different narrative styles. For another, the novel avoids the typical linear narrative we are used to, as Tan gives us a series of stories divided into sections with no clear unifying plot or climactic event or moment. Focusing on these fundamental choices made by the author as she was constructing the novel—by asking yourself, for instance, why she chose to have all of the women tell their stories instead of using a single narrator and why she opted for a fragmentary effect rather than interweaving the stories into a more coherent narrative—can bring to light significant aspects of the work you may not have otherwise noticed and lead to interesting insights into the novel's meanings.

Sample Topics:

1. Narration: According to E. D. Huntley, the Joy Luck mothers use "talk story" to communicate with their daughters. Critic Linda Ching Sledge defines talk story as "a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people, performed in the various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese." Sledge explains that as it helped to "redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore, talk story retained the structures of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography, casuistical dialogue) long after other old-century traditions had died" (qtd. in Huntley 32). What is the significance of this type of narration to the meanings of the stories these mothers tell and to the overarching themes of the novel?

Do some background reading on talk story. Reread the novel, paying close attention this time to the narrative style of each protagonist. What generalizations can you make about the daughters' narratives? The mothers'? To whom does each woman seem to be speaking? Would you agree with Huntley that the form of the mothers' stories just as much as the content of those stories is an attempt to remain connected and to connect their daughters to the China they left behind?

2. Structure: Analyze and evaluate the structure and organization of *The Joy Luck Club*, a novel with only a loose connection among its various narratives. What is Tan communicating by making the structural choices she does?

Literary critic Ben Xu, in an essay entitled "Memory and the Ethnic Self: Reading Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," observes that the stories share no recognizable pattern or fully integrated narrative structure. The character relations are suggested but never fully interwoven or acted out as a coherent drama. Our attention is constantly called to the characteristics of fiction that are missing from the book. It is neither a novel nor a group of short stories. It consists of isolated acts and events, which remain scattered and disbanded. It has neither a major plot around which to drape the separate stories, nor a unitary exciting climax which guides the book to a final outcome (13–14).

These conclusions are not surprising, given that Tan wrote the book as a collection of short stories. Readers, scholars, and reviewers, however, have insisted on calling it a novel. Why do you think this is? Does the text work as a novel? What holds it together? What makes it a strong work of literature? How might the form chosen by Tan be connected to or reflective of the themes of the piece as a whole? To answer these questions, you will want to chart out for yourself all the various parts of the book and how they are related to each other. Locate the critical moments in each person's story. You will also want to spend some time thinking about how *The Joy Luck Club* would be different if it were presented as a traditional novel complete with a linear narrative, a clear climax, and a single

protagonist as well as how it would be different if it were considered a short story collection.

Language, Symbols, and Imagery

Tan's novel is rife with symbolism. You might choose to do an essay on a symbol that appears in one set of stories, such as the modern, sleek, and very slanted end table that decorates the guest room in Lena and Harold's renovated barn. An examination of the origins of that piece of furniture, its aesthetic and functional characteristics, and the responses it draws from the various characters can give you a glimpse into the dynamics of Lena and Harold's relationship as well as, perhaps, its fate. Alternatively, you might focus on a type of symbol that makes an appearance in more than one instance, the gift of jewelry from mother to daughter, for example: You might consider Suyuan's gift of the jade pendant to Jing-mei and the necklace of pearls and the sapphire ring given to a young An-mei. You would ask yourself in this case what prompts the gifting in each of these occasions as well as what the gift represents to both daughter and mother. You might expand your inquiry to include other gifts such as Suyuan's gift of the piano to Jing-mei on her 30th birthday, or you might decide to look also at the gifts given from daughter to mother to deepen your investigation into the symbolic exchanges between the two generations. No matter what symbol or set of symbols you choose to concentrate on, remember not to stop at simply figuring out what the symbol represents. You do not want simply to conclude that the end table represents Lena and Harold's relationship. You want to use your analysis of the symbol to help explore one of the novel's major themes or characters. You might, for instance, conclude that Tan's use of the end table suggests that Harold's modern, edgy take on the world may be pleasing on the surface—Lena can never quite articulate what is wrong with his seemingly logical and progressive vision of the world, including the way they divide up their income to ensure their equality—but it is ultimately exposed as impractical and unsustainable.

1. Swan feather: In the introduction to the first section of the novel, Tan tells the story of a Chinese woman who buys a swan from a merchant who tells her it was a duck that tried to be a goose by stretching its neck out. The woman brings the swan with her to the United States, where she believes she will have a daughter and then, one day, give her the swan "a creature that became more than what was hoped for" (17). When the woman arrives in America, the swan is taken from her, and all she can hold on to is a single feather. The woman decides to pass on the feather to her daughter, but she never attains the perfect English she believes is necessary to pass this treasure on to her daughter. Why do you think Tan chose to begin *The Joy Luck Club* with this story? What might the swan and the feather represent in the overarching pattern of the novel?

Think about what similarities there might be between the experiences of the Joy Luck women and the woman in the swan story. The woman is unable to hold on to the swan, which to her represents possibility and hope. Are the Joy Luck club women able to keep their hopes and dreams intact when they arrive in America, or do they have to abandon or adjust them once they are faced with the reality of life in San Francisco? How do the women feel about their own broken English, especially when compared with their daughters' English? Finally, do they feel that their daughters understand and appreciate the precious things that they have to pass on to them? Will they keep waiting, like the woman in the story, for the right time to share with their progeny what is important to them, or do they ultimately seize the moment, whether perfect or not?

2. End table: What does the end table symbolize? What statement does it make about Lena and Harold's relationship? What do Ying-ying's reaction to the table and Lena's response to that reaction tell us about each of them and their relationship to each other?

Locate the passages in the text that describe the end table and analyze them carefully. Where does the table come from? What words are used to describe it? How do Harold, Lena, and Ying-ying feel about it? How is the end table related to the rest of the house? What is the significance of the fact that the vase of flowers that Lena sets on the table to decorate the room for her mother crashes to the floor? What are Lena and Harold saying to each other when the crash occurs?

3. Pearl necklace/jewelry: An-mei is stunned by the gift of a pearl necklace from Wu Tsing's second and most powerful wife. Her mother stomps on it, breaking one of the beads, which turns out to be glass, saying to An-mei, "I will not let her buy you for such a cheap price" (231). An-mei's mother then removes the crushed bead and knots the strand back together, making An-mei wear it for a week until she learns her lesson. At the end of the week, she gives An-mei a "heavy ring of watery blue sapphire, with a star in its center so pure that [she] never ceased to look

at that ring without wonder" (232). What do the string of pearls and the sapphire ring represent?

How does An-mei's mother know that the pearls are fake? What can she see that An-mei's young eyes cannot? In what spirit was the gift of the necklace made? How about the ring? What kind of person is Second Wife? What kind of person is An-mei's mother? What lesson has An-mei learned through this experience? You might think about other gifts of jewelry from mother to daughter in the novel as well, such as Suyuan's gift of the jade pendant, her "life's importance," to Jing-mei at the New Year's dinner. What does this piece of jewelry and this gesture represent? Is it similar to An-mei's mother's gift of the sapphire ring?

4. Piano: What does the piano represent for Jing-mei and her mother? What commentary does their treatment of it make on the nature of their relationship?

Reread the portions of the novel having to do with Jing-mei's piano lessons and her disastrous piano recital in "Two Kinds," paying particular attention to the fight she and her mother have after the recital. Jing-mei says to her mother: "You want me to be someone I'm not! ... I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be! ... I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother" (142). After this, Suyuan never makes Jing-mei practice piano again. She does, however, offer to give Jing-mei the piano for her 30th birthday. Jing-mei "saw the offer as a sign of forgiveness, a tremendous burden removed" (143). Why did Suyuan want Jing-mei to master the piano in the first place? What did her daughter's playing mean to her? What did the piano lessons and the recital mean for Jing-mei? What did Jing-mei's awful performance at the recital mean to each of them? Do you think that Jing-mei was right, that the offer of the piano as a birthday gift was meant as a sign of forgiveness? For what exactly does Jing-mei feel the need for forgiveness? For the spiteful words she said to her mother years ago, or for something more?

5. Chinese/English language: According to scholar Victoria Chen, "Speaking a language is inherently political" (86). What does this mean? How is language connected to power and privilege in *The Joy Luck Club*?

Chen continues: "Language and identity are always positioned within a hierarchical power structure in which the Chinese American immigrants' form of life has never been granted a status equal to that of their European counterparts in the history of this country" (86). How is language connected to power in the novel? Think in particular about Ying-ying: Her daughter must translate for her or else her husband simply forms his own interpretation of what she must be intending to say.

Why do the mothers want their children all to speak perfect English? How do they feel about their own command of the English language? How are the daughters' positions in American culture determined in part by their mastery of the English language? Do any of the daughters speak Chinese? Do the mothers want their daughters to speak Chinese as well as English? Why or why not?

Compare and Contrast Essays

Comparing two elements of a particular work or two separate works to each other can enable you to notice features of the work that might not have seemed significant when examined alone but that take on significance or additional dimensions when viewed in this new context. Take Waverly and Jing-mei and their careers, for example. Both seem like successful career women supporting themselves doing work they enjoy. When you pit them against each other, however, you can see that, comparatively speaking, Waverly is a much greater success in the working world than Jing-mei. We learn that Waverly's firm has deemed copywriting work done by Jing-mei as so inadequate they will not pay her fee. You might use this observation as a springboard to discuss how success is defined in the novel. Does it have to do with money, prestige, power? You might also observe that despite the disparity in levels of success, both young women seem to feel that they have somehow disappointed their mothers. If only one of them felt this way, you might deem the reaction an idiosyncrasy, but having observed this pattern, you can begin to investigate the causes. Could this perception of filial failure have more to do with the nature of their mothers' expectations, perhaps, than the actual level of success or happiness the daughters have personally achieved?

Sample Topics:

1. Waverly and Jing-mei: Waverly and Jing-mei have been rivals since they were children, in part because of their

mothers' desire to pit them against each other. While Waverly was a chess prodigy, Suyuan tried to prod Jing-mei into discovering where her genius lay. Despite the fact that Waverly seems to have always enjoyed success, while Jing-mei has often struggled and failed, the two share a sense that they have disappointed their mothers. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast these characters, using them to draw some conclusions about what it was like to be a second-generation Asian American in the later half of the 20th century.

Make a list of similarities and differences in Jing-mei's and Waverly's circumstances, upbringings, and personalities. From what do the commonalities stem? What about the differences? Which of the characters is shown in a more positive light in the novel? Does either ultimately seem happier than the other? Because their lives have always been somehow intertwined, consider how either of them might appear more or less successful if the other were not there as a comparison. Are they, in fact, defined largely in contrast to each other?

2. Old and new China: Compare and contrast the China of 1949 when Ying-ying, Suyuan, An-mei, and Lindo left it and the China they visit in the later part of the 20th century. How does Tan characterize the evolution?

Reread the stories set in 1930s and 1940s China. Based on Tan's plots and characterization, how would you describe the land? The people? The customs? What would you describe as negative and what as positive? Now examine the scenes set in modern-day China, focusing especially on the final chapter in which Jing-mei and her father travel to China to meet Jing-mei's two half sisters. What is this new China like? What does it have in common with the old? What would you describe as positive and negative about Tan's presentation of 1980s China?

3. *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior* or *Love Medicine*: *The Joy Luck Club* is most often compared to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, each of which presents the story of a marginalized culture with a series of interconnected stories. Compare and contrast *The Joy Luck Club* with either *The Woman Warrior* or *Love Medicine*, using your analysis to draw conclusions about both texts.

Read the two texts that you have decided to compare and contrast. How is each of them structured and organized? What point of view is used to tell the stories? How are the stories connected to one another? Why do you think each author opted to construct the work in this way instead of creating a more cohesive, linear narrative? What effect does this type of presentation achieve in each case? Why do you think that these women writing about marginalized populations would make similar choices about the presentation of the story they wish to tell in fragments?

Further Information

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