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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Amy Tan is the daughter of immigrants who fled to America during the Chinese civil war of the 1940s. She grew up negotiating the difference between the world her parents knew in China—hierarchical, fatalistic—and the brash, opportunistic ways of their adopted land.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one of the commentators.

Distribute the following: “Introduction to the Novel,” “Amy Tan (b. 1952),” and “World War II and San Francisco’s Chinatown” from the Reader’s Guide; and Handout One: From China to Gold Mountain and Handout Two: A Chinese Glossary. Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned. Ask students to add creative twists to make their presentations memorable. Also, ask them to develop one question about the topic not covered in the essay and a suggestion of where a reader might go to find an answer.

Writing Exercise

Have students write a short story that includes factual details from their parents’ or their own lives, as well as elements from their own imaginations. Have students share their writing with a classmate.

Homework

Read the first two chapters. Using the writing exercise, have students collect stories from their mothers, grandmothers, and/or aunts.

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The novel spans from the 1920s through the 1980s, following two generations of women. Mothers, born and raised in China, find themselves in San Francisco raising their own daughters. Both must navigate two worlds, with different languages, cultures, and habits. Through the mothers, members of the Joy Luck Club, we view Chinese coming-of-age stories. Through the daughters, we follow a struggle to understand one's Chinese heritage while coming of age in the United States as Asian Americans. Jing-Mei "June" Woo explains at the end of the novel, "I am becoming Chinese."

While significant historical events would mark the lives of these women, nothing permeated their lives as deeply as their role in family and marriage. In China, strength of character was built through respect for elders: "How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face . . . Why easy things are not worth pursuing." In America, young women can become a force of change within their own lives, "learning to shout." Ying-ying St. Clair declares at the end of the novel, "How could I know these two things do not mix?" San Francisco provides the setting in which this conflict unfolds in the lives of eight women.

Discussion Activities

Using Internet research, have students create a virtual tour of San Francisco's Chinatown to present to the class. What kind of food is available? What sorts of cultural events are taking place? What are the contemporary social issues of this Asian and Asian American community?

Using a map of San Francisco, map some of the locations that will be encountered in the novel: Golden Gate Park, Angel Island, Chinatown, Oakland Chinatown, Stockton Street, North Beach, and University of California, Berkeley.

Writing Exercise

In the first chapter, analyze the prologue "swan story." How might this story set the stage for the entire novel?

Homework

Have students read "Amy Tan's Style and Her Other Works." Have them finish the section "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away." Ask them to think about who is telling the story so far, and whether the voices seem in any way connected.

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Amy Tan achieves a studied portrait of Chinese American life through interlocking points of view. *The Joy Luck Club* is a serial first-person narration, recounted by eight narrators rather than one. Each narrator provides her own point of view as she recounts her experiences. Tan designs this serial narration like a hand of mahjong, as it moves from player to player according to the “Prevailing Wind.” Further, each narrator sheds light on the life of another narrator, as the narrators are friends and family members. Suyuan Woo’s death precipitates this storytelling, as the daughter inherits her seat at the mahjong table. As June Woo begins and closes the novel, her point of view dominates the text.

Discussion Activities

Why does Tan title the first section “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away?” Look at the first paragraph from each of the first four stories. How do these introductions depict the point of view of the narrator?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character that has appeared so far: June Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, or Ying-ying St. Clair. Have them imagine that the novel is going to be told entirely from the perspective of this character. Ask them to write a paragraph describing the virtues of the character and another describing her weaknesses. What qualities should the author focus on to make this version of the novel work? What advantages does Tan gain by creating a series of narrators rather than a single one?

Homework

Have students read the next two chapters. Several characters have been introduced so far: Lena and Ying-ying St. Clair, Waverly and Lindo Jong, An-mei Hsu, and June Woo. What are the primary motivations of each of these characters?

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The narrative structure of the novel unfolds, as the daughters' voices follow the mothers' China stories. Mothers and daughters, though often in conflict, remain the protagonists in their own stories. June Woo is present in each of the four sections, and joins the mothers as a peer at the game table. In the first book, antagonists vary from mothers to Chinese conventions. In the second book, the mothers provide the antagonist for the daughters, guiding and shaping their actions.

Discussion Activities

The Joy Luck Club has many villains or antagonists, but they are not obvious. Rather, all the narrators are faced with obstacles. What kinds of antagonistic forces do they encounter? Cultural traditions? Social prejudice? War? Racial or gender discrimination? As the stories progress, is there any sense that the various characters are fighting against the same thing?

Writing Exercise

Have each student choose a member of his or her family. Using the vignettes of the "swan story" and the "Twenty-Six Malignant Gates" as your model, write a brief story to capture the character of this family member. How does one best capture another's character through storytelling?

Homework

Have students finish the section "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates." What does June learn about the musical compositions "Perfectly Contented" and "Pleading Child?"

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Tan utilizes images frequently, as she draws us into a Chinese American life: images of birds, water, imbalance/balance, winds, and colors to gesture beyond literal descriptions. The story of the Moon Lady, “new tiger clothes,” a turtle, blood, and a servant bird, provide rich examples of figurative language. In this story, the Moon Lady provides an imaginative figure for a young child.

Discussion Activities

Return to the eight tales you have read thus far. Divide the class and have groups examine figurative language in each story. Ask students to identify similes and metaphors. In each story, how does figurative language assist in telling the story? Have groups present their findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

Tan has an uncommon gift for figurative language. Here she describes a storm with a striking metaphor: “I saw that lightning had eyes and searched to strike down little children.” Here she uses a simile to describe the emotions of a young child: “My heart felt like crickets scratching to get out of a cage.” Here she describes Old Lady Jong: “And her fingers felt like a dead person’s, like an old peach I once found in the back of the refrigerator.” Have students write a metaphor or simile for three different things: an aspect of nature (like a storm), a familiar emotion (like love or jealousy), and the description of a person (a friend or family member).

Homework

Have students read the next two chapters. Lena’s mother describes her daughter: “she like a ghost, disappear.” Are ghosts symbols of a more complex image?

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

The study of a symbol can shed light on an entire story. “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away,” for example, refers to a fable at the novel’s beginning where a beautiful swan is confiscated from a woman when she comes to America. With only one feather remaining, she is forced to remember all those she has left behind. “The Red Candle” of the third chapter refers to a custom whereby a candle is burned at both ends the night of a wedding—a symbol of the permanence of the marriage vow. The book’s title, *The Joy Luck Club*, is a complex symbol: The group of women is linked by fate, but the phrase is also a common Chinese expression that translation into English alters in meaning.

Discussion Activities

“The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates”—the title of section two—is the name of a Chinese children’s book. The book warns of different dangers awaiting unsuspecting children according to their birth dates. The gates do not literally exist. They express the possibility of danger or bad luck in everyday life. Why does Tan use this symbol as the title of a section? Why is the number of gates so precise? Why should we see them as gates rather than, say, pitfalls or traps?

Writing Exercise

Distribute Handout Three: Ghosts, and have students read it. An-mei Hsu says, “My grandmother told me my mother was a ghost. This did not mean my mother was dead.” Later, Lena St. Clair says of the terrors that frightened her mother, “I watched, over the years, as they devoured her, piece by piece, until she disappeared and became a ghost.” A ghost, in Chinese culture, is a rich symbol, suggestive of multiple meanings. Returning to the text, write a short essay about Tan’s use of ghosts in the story. Does her definition shift from the Chinese mothers to the Asian American daughters?

Homework

Have students finish the section “American Translation.” What lessons do we learn about translation in the stories that constitute “American Translation”?

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Much of the older generation in *The Joy Luck Club* has undergone a transformation before they even come to America. Suyuan Woo has had to abandon two daughters during the war with Japan, a loss she never stops mourning. Lindo Jong concocts a clever story to extricate herself from an arranged and unhappy marriage. An-mei Hsu's mother has committed suicide, thereby allowing her daughter to learn how to speak for herself. They all attempt to redeem their lives through their daughters in America. We see most of the characters advance from childhood to adulthood, each trying to incorporate the wisdom and experience of her mother. No character is more thoroughly changed than June Woo, who learns a lesson in Chinese humility—accepting the gift of her mother's jade necklace—and, by novel's end, undertakes a journey to China to find the missing part of her mother's story.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to work with a partner. Assign a mother-daughter duo to each pair. One student will role-play the mother and the other student will role-play the daughter. For discussion, students should review the stories that “they” have told in the novel. Pairs should discuss their characters primary motivations, strengths, and weaknesses. Have they undergone change? In what way? Do they have characteristics they are unable to change? What are they and why? Have each pair report its findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

In “American Translation,” we encounter the daughters as adults. Write an argument, supported by quotations from the novel, to defend the following statement: Each daughter struggles to find balance between Chinese heritage and American values through marriage and professional careers.

Homework

Have students read the next two chapters. Students should come to class with what they perceive to be the two most important turning points thus far in the novel.

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan makes deliberate choices about how to structure and pace events while exploring how tradition, fate, memory, and change define the human condition. In this lesson, map the events of the narrative to assess the artistry of the storytelling.

There are many turning points in *The Joy Luck Club*, but they do not always happen in the order we read them. Suyuan Woo leaves her babies on the road to Chungking. Lindo Jong escapes a dubious marriage. Rose Hsu Jordan learns to stand up to her husband. Ying-ying St. Clair aborts a child out of vengeance. And June Woo will go back to China to meet her sisters and discover the part of her that is truly Chinese.

Discussion Activities

Use the homework assignment from the last lesson to have students present the most important turning points in the novel. Ask them to refer to key passages from the story, explaining why these events are the most significant. Use this information for the next activity.

In small groups, have students map a timeline that depicts the development of the story and the building of drama. This timeline should include the most significant turning points, but also examine lesser events that build tension. As students develop their timelines, they should define what they perceive to be the beginning, middle, and the end of the novel. Groups should present their timelines to the class.

Writing Exercise

The novel is comprised of a series of self-contained stories. How does Tan integrate these varied stories? What devices does she use? Does the use of multiple narrators fail in any way? If so, how? If not, why not?

Homework

Have students finish the novel. Ask them to consider what are the most important forces guiding the lives of the characters.

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Joy Luck Club* makes about the following:

Fate and Memory: While fate looks forward toward our future or destiny, memory looks back to the past. Lena St. Clair's mother looks forward: "I believe my mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen." June speculates on her mother's past: "Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish." Are the daughters "fated" to face the same struggles as their mothers? Does this fate hinge on their ability to remember their mothers' pasts? Is the novel a memorial to June's mother to allow June to "become Chinese"?

Transformation: In Chinese, *nengkan* means the ability to do anything one seriously undertakes. "It was this belief in their *nengkan* that had brought my parents to America," says Rose Hsu Jordan. Do the mothers of the Joy Luck Club transform themselves in America—or only before they arrive? In what ways are the women changed by America? In what ways are they shaped by their own daughters? Do the adult daughters come to understand "joy luck," or does it not exist?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due for the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives, while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Joy Luck Club*? How is it different?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. How does Tan's novel provide a voice of a generation? How does the structure of the narrative, including eight voices with multiple stories, reflect an innovative approach to the novel? How might this lead the way for the next generation?

Divide students into groups and have each one choose the single most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Have students re-read the vignettes that introduce each of the four books. Write two pages explaining how these vignettes inform the structure of the novel. Do they assist in teaching the daughters (and us) "how to lose your innocence but not your hope. How to laugh forever"?

Homework

Students should finish their essays. See the Essay Topics. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide "Discussion Questions."

From China to Gold Mountain

From the U.S. Civil War through the mid-twentieth century, Chinese immigrants in America helped mine the gold fields, lay track for the transcontinental railroad, reclaim swamp land, and perform farm labor—all for meager wages. Early immigrants from China, most of them single men from the rural south, were drawn by the promise of *Gam Sann*, or “Gold Mountain,” as America was called. The California Gold Rush attracted thousands of Chinese between 1848 and 1860. In the late 1860s, when legislation forced them out of mining, they laid track for the Central Pacific Railroad on the transcontinental line. Their willingness to work—and the low wages they received—made them targets of anger and discrimination. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act severely limited immigration from China. This was the first U.S. immigration law aimed at a particular ethnic group.

This policy encouraged suffering, bureaucratic delay, and fraud. With immigration of Chinese nationals curtailed, only a small number were allowed in legally each year. Children of fathers from the “exempt” class—such as merchants and clergy who had already obtained U.S. citizenship—were spared these policies. Some who entered with papers were known as “paper sons” and “paper daughters.” They purchased documentation identifying themselves as children of U.S. citizens, when in fact they were not.

Beginning in 1910, would-be Pacific immigrants, over 70% of them Chinese, were screened at Angel Island in San Francisco Bay (like Ying-ying St. Clair was in *The Joy Luck Club*). Known as “the Ellis Island of the West,” Angel Island functioned as an interrogation center and detention facility for the federal immigration service. Over the course of 30 years, Angel Island processed 175,000 immigrants. Many were turned back. Unlike at Ellis Island, however, many Chinese were detained for weeks and months, and in several cases up to two years, before being permitted to join the American melting pot.

The Angel Island facility was closed in 1940; three years later the Chinese Exclusion Act and its corollaries were repealed. By this time, China was an ally in the war against Japan, and legal discrimination was not tolerated. After immigration quotas were abandoned in 1965, the Chinese American population in America nearly doubled over the next decade. The immigrant Chinese, who began as a cloistered community denied basic citizenship rights, had become, within a century, a largely urbanized and professionalized American success story.



A Chinese Glossary

The Joy Luck Club can be read as a primer on Chinese culture. The narrative is full of references to ghosts, *feng shui*, dumplings, tea, and luck. The very idea of the Joy Luck Club melds Chinese and American ideas—the characters are ruled by luck, but they may also invent their own luck.

Confucius: A Chinese philosopher of the sixth century B.C. His teachings, broadly known as Confucianism, emphasized ancestor worship, respect for elders and husbands, loyalty, harmony, and order. Though barely mentioned in *The Joy Luck Club*, his precepts color the traditional beliefs often reflected in the behavior of Tan's characters.

Feng shui (pronounced *fung shway*): The Chinese art of unblocking energy flow in a room or a house by careful arrangement of its contents. Placement of buildings is also considered important. Ying-ying St. Clair tells her daughter Lena that a plumbing store opening next to a bank portends ill, and the bank manager is later arrested for embezzlement. Lena herself becomes a designer, but her mother finds her deficient at basic concepts of *feng shui*.

Mahjong: A traditional Chinese game of skill and luck that features four corners, one for each direction of the wind. Using 144 painted tiles with such pictograms as dragons and flowers, the object is to build as many suites as possible in groups of three. Mahjong remains popular—the most recent incarnation is mahjong solitaire software.

Mandarin: Collectively, a set of related dialects spoken in northern and southwestern China. Standard Mandarin is the official language of the People's Republic of China and has close to a billion speakers. Other major Chinese languages include Cantonese and Wu.

Yin/yang: A duality from ancient Chinese philosophy that divides the universe into two opposing forces. The female principle, yin, is associated with darkness and passivity, represented by moon, winter, and earth. The male, yang, is luminous and active, and symbolized by sun, summer, and heaven.



Ghosts

Chinese scholar, sociologist, and anthropologist Xiaotong Fei referred to America as the “land without ghosts.” For immigrants, the American landscape lacked the layers of past ancestors, households, and journeys woven throughout the Chinese homeland. A sense of the difference between a Chinese ghost and an American ghost can inform how we read *The Joy Luck Club*.

Viewed from a Chinese perspective, American ghosts were shallow, lacked depth, and served primarily as the matter for children’s tales. Chinese ghosts and the spirits in Tan’s novel are far more than the supernatural presence of the undead.

One of the greatest novels of Chinese literature, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, depicts the story of two Chinese families living in Beijing during the eighteenth century. The hero has been reincarnated from a living stone left behind by a goddess. Other characters are reincarnations from the hero’s former life as the stone. The story is framed by the hero’s “dream of a red chamber.” The dream sheds more light on the tribulations of human life than the hero might surmise on his own. In keeping with Buddhist beliefs, the daily, tangible life of the body is a dream life. As we come closer to enlightenment, we “awaken” from this dream life to see the true world.

Ghosts can bring information from true reality into this world. Further, ghosts can provide us with hints as to our former lives and our future fates. In the present, we are often reflecting back on our former lives and contemplating our future reincarnations. As a result, past, present, and future weave tightly together, only artificially separated to make our analysis easier. Fei explains, “Life in

its creativity changes the absolute nature of time: it makes past into present—no, it melds past, present, and future into one inextinguishable, multilayered scene, a three-dimensional body. This is what ghosts are.” One writer on migration, Adam MacKeown, notes that ghosts represent “an intangible specter of the past that inhabited and affected the present.”

While Tan explicitly refers to ghosts numerous times, we might also hear the echo of ghosts in repeated symbols. For example, the novel begins as a swan is torn from a woman during immigration processing. She is left with one feather. Birds appear and re-appear throughout the novel. Are they the reincarnation of the former, true bird? Are they ghosts of a true bird? An-mei’s mother tells of a turtle that hatches seven magpie birds of joy. Ying-ying St. Clair tells of a bird domesticated to catch fish. When Chinese peasants refuse to suffer, the birds die, falling from the sky. Somehow, Tan’s birds are the ghostly indicator of suffering or joy throughout generations.

Ying-ying St. Clair remains most connected with the world of ghosts. Her second self enters this realm to meet the Moon Lady. Her musings demonstrate that she has “lost herself” to the other world. She worries that she has no spirit to pass on to her daughter and that Lena has also become a ghost. It is Tan’s stories, however, that let loose the spirit, a “hard, shiny and clear” link to the past, memorialized for the next generation.

