

In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson Study Guide

In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson by Bette Bao Lord

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Plot Summary

The year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson by Bette Bao Lord takes place in Sixth Cousin Wong's house with her family. Her family is a little different from the other families in China due to the fact that her father lives in America. It is 1947, shortly after World War II, and Mr. Wong has gone to America to try and create a better way of life for his family.

One day he calls and says they can now come live with him in America. Sixth Cousin gets a new name, Shirley Temple Wong, and heads overseas with her mother to find her father and live with him. Once they arrive, Shirley becomes lost when her father sends her on a cigarette run and she gets lost in the big city. She realizes while in the store that living in America isn't going to be what she thought it would be since she doesn't speak the language. Then, when she becomes lost, she doesn't have the ability to even ask for directions. Shirley's father has to rescue her at this point.

Shirley starts fifth grade in her school in America and she is fearful because she was only in the third year of school in China. She is afraid that she will not be as smart as the other children. Then, there are obvious issues to start off with, one being a language barrier. Shirley knows little English and even less social customs of American kids. She becomes isolated and sad for a majority of her first few months. Her mother doesn't make it easier on her as she tells Shirley that she is to be especially good in school as she is an ambassador for all Chinese people.

A few months later, Shirley makes friends with the school bully after she refuses to apologize or back down when she accidentally runs into Mabel, the bully. Thinking that she's defying her, Mabel promptly punches her in the face, giving her two black eyes. When the Wongs see Shirley that evening, they want to press charges, but Shirley refuses to tell them who did it. Mabel respects that and the next day they become friends. Mabel tells everyone that Shirley is her friend and it makes it easier for Shirley to be accepted by everyone.

The kids let her play baseball and while she doesn't understand all of the rules, she really likes it. The reader learns that in their apartment building, their landlady, Senora Rodriguez, plays piano. Shirley starts taking lessons from her. One day she comes for lessons and finds Senora crying because she misses her daughter in Mexico. The Wongs offer to watch the apartment building while Senora goes on a trip. With the money they save (since they don't have to pay rent that month) they are able to purchase Shirley a new bed. It is this biggest bed she's ever owned.

Later that next year a new girl, named Emily, arrives at school and Shirley, knowing how it feels to be lonely, befriends her and the two become fast friends. Shirley also begins to miss China, and believes she is losing her heritage. She tries and works on keeping her Chinese heritage alive. Her love for baseball grows as her friends take her to several outings and at the end of the year she presents Jackie Robinson the key to their

school. Even though there were many hardships she still overcomes them and keeps her heritage alive and strong in her.



Chapter 1

Summary

It's almost time for the Chinese New Year of the Boar. Sixth cousin Wong lives with her extended family, governed by a family Matriarch. Sixth Cousin's father travels away on business trips and writes often to the family. Just before New Year's, Sixth's mother gets a letter from the father stating that they can come live with him in America. She and her Grandmother decide she needs a new name to go to America. They both decide on Shirley Temple Wong, after the American actress, Shirley Temple. She has almost no worries about being in America and is looking forward to seeing her father for New Year's.

Analysis

In this chapter the reader can see the theme of Family demonstrated. One such instance is the Wong residence in China. The Wongs are run by a matriarch of the family, the Grandmother, who governs the family and pretty much, what she says goes. This way of life is contested by the American way where the men rule the family.

The members of the Wong family are mainly called by titles like Sixth cousin or Fourth cousin, and only when Sixth cousin moves to America does she take on the name Shirley. As the chapter progresses readers learn that Shirley's father has moved to America for work. The reader sees the theme of the American Dream demonstrated by Mr. Wong who believes that if he works hard enough, then in America, it is possible to live a very good life. Mr. Wong sought out a new life for his family and he is the reason Shirley even comes to America. She is fearless and endlessly optimistic about her future in America.

Shirley's optimism is directly in relation to her lack of knowledge of the American culture that she finds in later chapters to be misleading and strange. The added stress causes her mother to worry about the tickets to America even though they know they are legitimate.

Discussion Question 1

Compare the way people are named in China to the way people are named in America.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Sixth Cousin's American name selection. What are some of the things that might keep her from fitting in?



Discussion Question 3

What is the American Dream?

Vocabulary

patriarch, matriarch, plaited, squandered, mocking, queried, irate



Chapter 2

Summary

The trip was long and tiresome for the Wongs traveling to America. They took a boat across the sea to California then took a train to Brooklyn. The buildings were a real shock to Shirley as she had never seen such huge monuments to human ingenuity. Shirley and her mother, both coming from royal or higher upper class, have to get used to the modest accommodations, like Shirley's makeshift bed and the refrigerator.

Shirley's mother has to learn to cook their food and learn the ways of NYC. Shortly after they arrive, Shirley wants to impress her father and offers to fetch him his favorite cigarettes from the store he had taken her to just hours prior. Unfortunately, she gets lost on the way back and her father has to come rescue her. Shirley now starts to have her doubts about living in America.

Analysis

This chapter shows Shirley and her mother constantly having to adapt to the new situations and surroundings America. Coming from a place of wealth within the Wong family mansion, Mama Wong never had to wash clothes or cook dinner, but now in America she has to become a house wife and learn to do these things as well as use new technology, such as the washer and stove, Shirley has a bed all to herself and this is a shock to her because she had a really tiny bed in China, and this one is larger even if it is makeshift. Shirley has to adapt to the American customs like greetings and other social cues.

When her father wants to go get cigarettes Shirley offers to go get them herself. She gets to the store without a problem but realizes the language barrier is an issue. The theme of Isolation is demonstrated here as she starts to realize that if she can't get a store clerk to understand her how will she be able to make friends in school. The Isolation theme is a major theme throughout the story but this instance is when she is first struck with the stark realization that she is going to have a rough time in school and it scares her. All the buildings look identical and she has a tough time remembering how to get around. All this contributes to the feeling of being alone and isolated.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the adjustments that the family are having to make to living in America?



Discussion Question 2

After living in America for a week or so, what does Shirley think about it?

Discussion Question 3

What does Shirley learn as a result of getting lost coming home from the store?

Vocabulary

abacus, mourners, forlorn, illustrious, interrogate, custom



Chapter 3

Summary

This chapter signals the first day of Shirley's fifth grade school experience. Shirley only has completed three years of Chinese schooling and feels like she is missing out on knowing things because they are in the fifth grade. Shirley loves to be a part of the group, but doesn't know what anyone is saying, nor can she remember who is who because they are all different looking. To make matters worse, her mother tells her to do her very best because she is an ambassador, of sorts, for all Chinese people who've come to America. Shirley is worried about dishonoring her family. To top it all off, she doesn't understand the custom of 'winking' and does it all wrong, judging by the laughter when she tried it.

Analysis

Shirley is having a crash course on American behavior in school. Her mother tells her that she must be good so that she can adequately represent China and her own family to her classmates. This instills a fear of failing in her head and causes much grief for her later down the road. Shirley feels isolated when she learns she will be attending fifth grade, as she had only completed three grades in China and feels left out of the school loop, as well as a sense of lacking intelligence because these kids have had more schooling than her. She finds it difficult to interpret and understand facial expressions from her teacher and class mates.

The theme of Overcoming Your Fears is demonstrated in that she has to overcome her fear of dishonoring her family at school, her mother has told her she is an ambassador of China and to be happy even though she is neither of those things. The words spoken to her by her mother seem to weigh down on her and cause her to worry many times throughout the day. The only thing that really happened negatively is that she winked too much, because she doesn't understand winking.

The theme of Isolation in this chapter as well as the theme of Family is demonstrated. The theme of Family is shown in Shirley's culture when her mother tells her to represent her family in school. This is typically a Chinese way of thinking that clashes with the individuality movement that everyone in America strives for. Isolation is shown through the winking incident, as Shirley doesn't understand a wink and thinks it is to be done all the time. She isolates herself further when the teachers and students think there is something wrong with her eyes. Another demonstration of the theme of Isolation is the fact that she speaks very little English and doesn't understand the teachers or classmates.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the winking incident indicate that Shirley doesn't understand American expressions?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Isolation and how Shirley is experiencing it.

Discussion Question 3

What might have helped Shirley to have a better first day?

Vocabulary

balmy, humiliate, formidable, feeble, ancestral, callously, awkwardly



Chapter 4

Summary

After a month of American school Shirley still hasn't made many friends, and she wants to make friends. Shirley finds it is hard to make friends seeing as she can only speak a few words of English. She desperately wants to connect with others and is eventually asked to play baseball. She's not good at it but loves to be a part of the game. Not many people are thrilled to have her play however.

The day after the baseball game, the class has to recite poems, except for Shirley. Shirley has memorized one despite the language barrier. She's learned it from her father's records. As she starts, the class begins to laugh as Shirley has memorized the Mickey Mouse anthem instead of a poem. She is devastated and sulks most of the day.

Shirley's mother signs her up for piano lessons with the landlady, Señora Rodriguez. This is only enjoyable to Shirley because of Rodriguez's parrot who chants the note if you get it right. Shirley finally finds another Chinese girl at school, but to Shirley's dismay this girl is American, and she knows nothing about China or how to speak Chinese. Once spring break hits, Shirley's father gets her roller blades and she ends up falling a lot. Her mother asks for her to give up the skates and Shirley cries, so her mother gives in and only lets her have them on the condition that she skate with her dad only.

Analysis

This chapter is starting to show the isolation and effects of isolation on Shirley. Shirley is upset easily. She wants to make friends but literally doesn't know what to say or how to act. During the chapter Shirley is asked to play stoop-ball, a version of baseball, and Shirley is thrilled to play but eventually becomes an outcast due to her not knowing how it is played. This causes her to feel even more isolated.

Later on in the chapter the class has to recite poems, except for Shirley who can't speak English. The theme of Persistence is demonstrated when she goes ahead and memorizes what she thinks to be a poem. When it ends up being the Mickey Mouse anthem everyone ends up laughing at her and she has have it explained to her why they are laughing. The social and language barrier is to blame for her mistake, since she didn't understand what was actually being said.

Humiliated and feeling cut off from society Shirley becomes depressed. Shirley starts taking classes with the old landlady, Senora, whom Shirley is afraid of due to her physical appearance. Eventually, however, Shirley begins to like her piano lessons and makes friends with Senora, and then she doesn't feel so isolated. Eventually Shirley finds another Chinese girl in school and is excited because of the allure of finding a



kindred spirit but is let down when she realizes the Chinese girl is actually American born and doesn't know anything Chinese.

Discussion Question 1

Why might Shirley be depressed about living in America now?

Discussion Question 2

How has meeting Mrs. Rodriguez helped?

Discussion Question 3

What shocked Shirley about the other Chinese girl that she met?

Vocabulary

lure, hostility, ingenuity, coaxed, skeptical, ignorant, unperturbed



Chapter 5

Summary

Shirley has no friends still. This provokes her into trying to rationalize that she is much happier without friends. She knows she is just lying to herself to make herself feel better. Shirley is on her way to class one day when she walks face-first into the school bully, Mabel. Mabel insults her and then beats her up, effectively giving her two black eyes. Shirley's parents want to go to the police but Shirley won't rat out Mabel. When Shirley comes back to school Mabel is nice to her for not telling on her, and the two become friends. Mabel invites her to play baseball and Shirley ends up hitting a home run. Mabel is the biggest and scariest girl in school and now Shirley is her good friend. This elevates Shirley's status overnight.

Analysis

Shirley in this chapter meets Mabel. Mabel is the typical American school bully. While cleaning the classroom Shirley bumps into Mabel and doesn't back down due to her not understanding Mabel nor her threats. Mabel punches her in the face and gives her black eyes. Instead of telling on Mabel Shirley keeps quiet out of fear, though Mabel doesn't know this. By not telling, however, Mabel becomes her good friend because Shirley gains her respect and Shirley gains the toughest girl as a close friend. Mabel becomes Shirley's key to fitting in with others. Mabel teaches Shirley games and how to skate. Slowly, Shirley learns the language and how to act.

The theme demonstrated here is Friendship, showing that it can form in the most unlikely of places. Even though Shirley has a huge issue communicating with others she has made a friend. Shirley's isolation has finally started to wane. By making friends, Shirley has started to assimilate into the classroom and no longer is the social outcast.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of Friendship demonstrated in this chapter?

Discussion Question 2

How has meeting Mabel changed Shirley's life?

Discussion Question 3

What will most likely happen to Shirley now that she's made a friend?

Vocabulary

extravagant, faltered, ambassador, escapade, revolted, sinister, ordeal



Chapter 6

Summary

Shirley has many friends now and even has started to understand many of the social customs. She says the pledge of allegiance, pronouncing most of the words wrong, but she still tries it. Shirley asks why her friends are calling her Jackie Robinson, and the teacher in turn replies that it is because she is a good baseball player and is like Jackie Robinson, the famous player. The teacher explains the American dream and how she and Jackie Robinson are alike in many aspects. Summer break is days away and the whole class is restless.

Analysis

In this chapter Shirley has many friends thanks to Mabel and is even given a nickname: Jackie Robinson. Shirley doesn't understand nicknames and asks her teacher for help understanding. The teacher takes this time to explain why Jackie is important to America. Jackie is used as a symbol in this chapter to represent the breaking of racial barriers and to display the American Dream.

Jackie is African American and has had to fight to make his career in baseball but eventually is able to. Shirley aspires to be like him because she too has to fight for her American Dream. Shirley decides to make The American Dream her dream. She wants to make her own way in America. This optimism is also shared by her father as well.

In the school Shirley has assimilated nicely and has even decided to do the pledge of allegiance. The theme of Persistence is demonstrated in her determination to say the pledge even though the words are spoken incorrectly.

Discussion Question 1

What did Shirley learn about Jackie Robinson?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Shirley's thoughts about the American Dream.

Discussion Question 3

How has being good at baseball helped Shirley?

Vocabulary

reverent, regale, intimidated, devour, injustice, disposition, meticulous



Chapter 7

Summary

Shirley has no plans for the summer even though her friends do. To keep herself occupied she keeps up with her piano lessons with Senora. During a lesson Shirley offers to take Senora's bird for a walk and after much debate Senora lets her. Readers see a theme of Friendship being played out in this chapter by this action and when Shirley arrives back at the apartment she finds Senora is upset. Shirley reminds her of her own daughter back in her home country. Senora wants to go back to Mexico to visit her daughter, but is afraid of being robbed again. Shirley tells Senora she can trust Shirley to watch her place while she goes away to visit her daughter. Senora accepts the offer and starts getting things in order for the trip.

Analysis

While everyone leaves for summer vacations Shirley has no plans for the summer and to stay out of trouble she continues her piano with Senora. She offers to take her pet bird for a walk and returns to find Senora sad. The theme of Family is demonstrated by Senora wanting to return home to see her daughter, but being too afraid to leave. Shirley offers to watch this place for her so she can go without worrying. It has been ten years since Senora has seen her daughter. Family is as important to Senora as it is for the Wong family; therefore, Shirley feels a connection and is motivated to make the offer to watch her house. Shirley enlists her family to also help with watching the building and Senora's place.

Persistence is also observed in how Shirley persists with taking the bird for walks and Senora eventually agreeing to let her go. This forms a deeper friendship between the two.

Discussion Question 1

Compare how the Wong family feels about family and the way Senora feels about her daughter.

Discussion Question 2

Why did Shirley feel moved to offer to watch Senora's apartment?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Family in this chapter.

Vocabulary

vermin, concoction, composure, emanated, aspire, indistinguishable



Chapter 8

Summary

Senora agrees to let the Wongs watch her apartment and the entire building, and she also tells them that they don't have to pay rent for the summer. This allows the Wongs to buy Shirley an actual bed, which is really a pull-out couch. Shirley loves to help her dad around the place fixing and caring after things. Mr. Wong's favorite part is all the gadgetry down in the boiler room basement.

Shirley doesn't understand his interest in those things until they start cleaning up the basement and find old treasures from past tenants. One night the electricity goes off and Shirley goes to the basement to quickly turn on the power. She does this because she is trying to show how brave she is, but then, after she is down there, she realizes how scared she is. Suddenly her father appears from nowhere with his lighter and scares Shirley. The two get the lights on and she realizes that she had been touching the basement's wet paint and ruined the paint job. Her father simply paints over it the next day.

Analysis

With the landlady asking the Wongs to watch her place while she goes to visit her own daughter the Wongs no longer have to pay rent for the month. This is used to buy Shirley a proper bed. This is important because she has never had a bed as big as the one she gets from her parents. Father Wong is an engineer and is in love with American gear and gadgets, especially those he found in the basement/Boiler room. During Senora's trip the family has to watch the complex and keep it running. The theme of Traditions is seen when the family cleans the basement, as it is their custom to keep a clean house and now the whole building is considered their house.

During the power outage Shirley jumps on the chance to prove herself to her father, and runs to the basement but becomes trapped in there by her own fear of the "monster". Shirley's father comes to the rescue.

Discussion Question 1

What are some examples of how Shirley is beginning to like living in America?

Discussion Question 2

What allows the Wongs to be able to finally buy Shirley a bed?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the incident in the basement.

Vocabulary

commemorate, reunion, hovered, feigned, embarked



Chapter 9

Summary

School starts again in August and Shirley is really nervous about starting the 6th grade. Shirley is afraid everyone will have changed and she won't have any friends anymore. Shirley has a dream the night before about her being back in China. In her dream her family is laughing at her and her uncle paints her as a weird looking bird. The next morning, once she reaches school, she realizes she had nothing to fear because everyone is exactly the same and they even have the same teacher.

The only different thing is Emily, the new girl. Shirley makes small talk with Emily and they become fast friends, and when Shirley goes to Emily's house she realizes her family is far different than her own. They call each other by first names, even the children to the parents. Emily insists Shirley keep a secret when Emily shows her the biological books her father has with naked people in it. He is a psychiatrist. Shirley begins to babysit to earn money and her parents buy her a piggy bank to save her money in, but instead she spends most of her money on candy and doesn't tell her family. She feels really bad about it and eventually goes to Emily for help, Emily promises to help her save her money. During her next babysitting job she listens to the Dodgers big game and one of the babies unplug the radio making her miss the rest of the game. She chocks it up to karma for not telling her parents about her spent money.

Analysis

This chapter chronicles the return of the school year and with it a returning of the fear Shirley has about being isolated again. Shirley is afraid her friends will have gone off and changed too much and won't like her anymore, as she also has reservations for the upcoming school year in the sixth grade. When she returns she realizes everything is the same and she settles down. The theme of Friendship is demonstrated when Shirley sees the new girl and remembers what it was like being the new kid. She extends her hand in friendship and Emily takes it.

Emily is the daughter of a congresswoman and a psychiatrist, and she is very intelligent. The family is progressive and the kids refer to their parents by their first names, which Shirley finds odd. This progressiveness confuses Shirley's ideals of family because she would never talk to her family members like that but in Emily's family it is okay. What her family would consider a lack of respect, Emily's family allows.

The theme of Family is demonstrated in this chapter through Shirley's attitude toward babysitting. She feels it is an honor to babysit. However, when the baseball game comes onto the radio, she ends up missing the game because she was caring for the children. She does enjoy the money that she earns by babysitting, but has a problem of holding on to it as she'd told her parents she would. She purchases, instead, candy for



herself and her friends. When her father asks her about the money, she tells him to continue to think that she hasn't spent it, which makes her feel guilty. She confides in Emily who agrees to help her to save the money she would make from now on. Due to her upbringing in China she believes that karma is a big part of her life, so while she is listening to a big baseball game on the radio, while babysitting, it is unplugged by a child she is supposed to be watching and she totally misses the game. She believes this to be a work of karma and that she is being repaid for misleading her father and not watching the children as she should have been doing.

Discussion Question 1

How is Emily different from Shirley?

Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of Family demonstrated in this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Shirley not save her money as she'd planned to?

Vocabulary

quizzical, protruded, hoary, odious, teetered, pauper, hue, beset



Chapter 10

Summary

This is a very short chapter covering the World Series Dodger's game. Shirley and all her friends go to Mr.P's house after school to listen to the game. The Dodgers lose the game and everyone is literally crushed by this information. Shirley is especially devastated but eventually gets over it. Tommy ends up insulting the Dodgers and everyone gets really mad at him for it.

Analysis

This chapter is all of two pages and doesn't cover much of anything other than the baseball world championships with the Dodgers. Shirley is a huge fan now and after school all the kids rush out to listen to the game on radio. There is one kid who bad mouths the team and is met with anger, which is an American habit that Shirley adopts in order to become more American. When the Dodgers lose Shirley starts to think that maybe the America dream can't be reached since her team lost, but she quickly loses that notion.

What this chapter illustrates is how far Shirley has come in one year. She is now speaking the language fairly well. She has friends, and is spending time with them. She has a better living situation and she's begun to pick up mannerisms and customs that are typically American in nature. The theme of the American Dream is touched upon in this chapter when Shirley calls it into question. In her mind if a person worked hard, then it should be that they were guaranteed of success. She realizes that this doesn't extend to ball games, but rather to other types of work, such as school or a career.

Discussion Question 1

What lets the reader know that Shirley is starting to act like an American?

Discussion Question 2

What is Shirley's misconception about the American Dream?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the American Dream as it pertains to this chapter.

Vocabulary

befitted, ousted, molt, equivalent, scanty, recitation



Chapter 11

Summary

The Mid-Autumn Festival is almost upon the Wong family and they have just barely remembered it. They have been really busy in America. When they realize what time of year it is they are all home sick and decide to remember what would be going on in China at this time of the year if they were still there.

Luckily, their Grandfather baked and sent them all moon cakes, which was almost like being there. Overall, they are all sad about missing out on the festivities. Shirley decides to tell one of the grandfather Wong stories. As she tells the story, Shirley wishes she was the girl in the story. The story is basically about a betrothal pact made by two friends about their unborn children. If it were a boy and girl they would marry. The friend had to move away and eventually the children are born. The friend's daughter grew to love a fisherman and ran off with him and started a family but became grief stricken over time and the family went to the daughter's friend's house to apologize for their daughter marrying someone else, but it turns out the wife and daughter are the same and merge into one person. In other words, the fisherman that she'd met and run off with WAS the man she'd been promised to all those years before, even though they didn't know that. Shirley wishes to be this girl and dreams of the day when she can go visit her family back in China.

Analysis

This chapter demonstrates the themes of Family and Tradition. The Mid-Autumn Festival in China is almost upon the Wong family but being away from their culture they almost forgot about it. When grandfather sends them moon-pies, a traditional Chinese dessert for the festival, they are shocked at how easily it had been to forget something that had, at one time, seemed so important. This makes them all feel terrible.

Tradition is big in this chapter as they all sit around and recreate the festival like they would have done had they still been in China. Each person goes around and recreates a tradition in the Wong family, like stories. Shirley tells a story her grandfather would always tell about a girl whose destiny brings her full circle to where she would have been to begin with. The fact that the girl was, essentially, two different people, and didn't know it, resonates with her. This story is a symbol of Shirley as she is also two worlds in one: Chinese and American. Shirley constantly wishes to be this girl in the story but doesn't realize she already is.

As a result of their day of recreating traditions Shirley feels homesick and misses her family in China. Shirley daydreams about visiting. This is the first time the reader sees Shirley showing homesickness. Family is very important to her and it is hard during a holiday to celebrate without them.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the author choose to include Grandfather's holiday story at this point in the book?

Discussion Question 2

How does the reader know that Shirley misses her family in China?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism of the story of the girl from China.

Vocabulary

solace, lotus, lute, clansman, shimmering, pessimistic



Chapter 12

Summary

The final chapter takes place in November during the Thanksgiving play. Shirley is the turkey and is the star of the show; her friends helped her make the costume. When the Christmas break finally starts approaching, Shirley helps Emily become elected for the Christmas assembly, and the guest speaker turns out to be Jackie Robinson. Shirley is thrilled for Emily who will be awarding Jackie the key to the school. But as the days lead up to the assembly Shirley becomes more and more jealous of Emily. Eventually Emily, knowing how much Shirley admires Mr. Robinson, gives the spot to Shirley and she gets to meet Jackie.

Shirley's mother is pregnant as well during this time and Shirley is positive it is a boy. Jackie is happy to meet Shirley and states she could be the next president of the United States. She says she can't because she wasn't USA born. Shirley then insists her brother could be, though. This is how a girl from China lived in America without losing who she truly was. As the assembly closes they all cheer for Shirley and she imagines that in some small way all of her family from China were there with her too.

Analysis

During the chapter Shirley is in the school Thanksgiving play, this shows just how far Shirley has come from the first chapter. Shirley went from a shy timid outcast to starring as the turkey in the school play. Through perseverance Shirley has become a popular girl and an American-Chinese. During the next event at the school Emily is elected to give an award to Jackie Robinson, Shirley's idol. Shirley starts to become really jealous and since Emily is a psychiatrist's daughter she can spot emotional problems very fast, she lets Shirley take her spot, demonstrating the theme of Friendship.

When Shirley meets Jackie Robinson he is very nice, and symbolizes Shirley meeting her goals and dreams in America. Jackie states she could become the next president, but Shirley knows she can't. However, she passes that torch onto her unborn little brother. Since family is an important thing to Shirley she is already very proud of her brother.

The book ends with the reader seeing Shirley settling in and enjoying her new life in America. She's been able to learn American ways while still honoring the things that matter to her and her family, about China. . By doing so Shirley feels as if she has honored her family and her ancestors, and the reader knows that she will achieve the American Dream for herself when she is older.



Discussion Question 1

What indicates that Emily is a good friend to Shirley?

Discussion Question 2

How does Shirley handle Mr. Robinson's question about her becoming president some day?

Discussion Question 3

Compare Shirley at the end of the book to Shirley at the beginning of the book; how has she changed?

Vocabulary

sultry, dallied, flinched, dwarfed, dapper, brimful



Characters

Shirley Wong

Shirley Wong is the main protagonist in the book. She and her mother come from China to America to be with her father. Shirley starts fifth grade not soon after she arrives in the new country. The language and social barriers are the main obstacles that Shirley will have to overcome. She has problems making friends and this causes her to become isolated from everyone in her new class. She is very lonely at first but eventually starts to understand how American people and society work and she makes friends. Eventually she makes friends and becomes a top student in her school. Shirley loves baseball and is the Dodgers number one fan. By the winter break of her sixth grade year, she ends up meeting her idol, Jackie Robinson

Mother Wong

Shirley's mother is a fierce mother who is easily frightened over little things and worries. Although she worries a lot, when it comes down to it, she is level-headed and able to do what's necessary to get the job done, no matter how scary. She doesn't want to have Shirley lose her Chinese heritage but also doesn't want her to miss her American future. She strives for Shirley to have a perfect balance.

Mabel

Mable is the bully of the fifth grade. Shirley runs into her on accident and when Shirley doesn't back down, Mable socks her right in both eyes. Shirley's parents want to take her to the police but Shirley refuses to tell on Mable due to the fear of Mabel retaliating. Once she comes back to school Mable befriends Shirley and forces everyone into accepting Shirley into the group of students. Mable started off a thorn but grew into Shirley's rose.

Father Wong

Shirley's Father, an engineer, sought out his own future in America. This was a very brave and risky thing for him to do and shows that he wanted a better life for his family. He loves gadgets and American machinery.

Emily

Emily is a smart girl from a smart progressive home where she refers to her parents by their first names; she is also Shirley's best friend. She is upfront about what she wants from life and this is in exact contrast with Shirley, as she is so unsure of everything.



Emily is also perceptive of other's emotions and realizes that giving the key to Jackie Robinson would hurt their friendship, so she lets Shirley do it in her stead.

Senora

Senora was originally feared by Shirley but eventually she came to love her once she began to take piano lessons from her. She has a pet bird and was robbed previously. Senora trusts the Wong family and takes them up on their offer to watch the building while she goes to Mexico to visit her daughter.

Mrs. R

She is the teacher of the fifth and sixth grade at P.S 8. She is a nice lady who commands respect from her students. She turns everything into a lesson in a good way and is one of the first to make Shirley feel welcomed in the class.

Grandmother Wong

She is the grandmother of Shirley and the matriarch of the Wong family. Her word is law in the Wong family. She is the one to tell Shirley she needs a new name to go to America.

Grandpa Wong

He is the grandfather of Shirley. He isn't seen in the book other than as a storytelling figure. Grandpa Wong also sends Moonpies to the family for the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Tommy

Tommy is a boy in Shirley's class that is a baseball fan. At first he doesn't like her because she doesn't know the rules of the game, but later they become friends.



Symbols and Symbolism

Jackie Robinson

Jackie Robinson becomes a symbol to Shirley. Shirley has to overcome her peers and how they perceive her because she is different, just like Jackie. Jackie and Shirley both have to struggle to fit in but ultimately overcome it and become well liked by many.

Baseball

Shirley uses this as a bonding vehicle with her classmates since they all love baseball. She teaches herself and with the help from others, the game. She becomes a good player and makes friends by doing so. This helps her feel a part of a group which is important to Shirley in her desperate attempt to fit in.

America

America represents the unknown to Shirley. This also represents her chance to change and the freedom to pursue an identity. The Wongs are all forced into taking on new roles, Mr. Wong with his new job and Mother Wong in her new role as a house wife. Shirley has the opportunity to reinvent herself and be whomever she wishes to be.

School

The school is a melting pot where American and Chinese values for Shirley are mashed together. This is where she learns how to be American.

Roller Blades

These were given to her by Shirley father to make her feel more like an American child. She fell a lot and her mother decided to make her give them back. Shirley protests and cries and her mother lets her keep them. By allowing her to keep them, and later on when Emily teaches her how to skate, symbolically she is embracing her role as an American.

Moon Pies

These are pastries made by grandfather Wong for the Mid-Autumn Festival. These are a traditional desert, and serve as a reminder of their culture and the family they left behind.



Grandpa Wong's story

The story is about a wife and daughter being one. This is a story Shirley identifies with, as she is also two in one: Chinese and American. The girls in the story become one wearing two dresses just like Shirley wearing an American and Chinese heritage.

Boiler machine

This a machine that kind of scares Shirley when she is in the Boiler room in the dark.

Pull out couch/ bed

Shirley gets a new bed that turns into a couch. This is the biggest bed she has ever had in her life.

Candy

When Shirley begins to babysit she makes more money than she's ever had before. She ends up spending it all even though she'd told her parents that she'd be responsible with it and save it.



Settings

Wong House (China)

This is where a brief part of the story originally takes place. Shirley lives there with her mother and extended family before they head to America to live with Mr. Wong.

Wong House (America)

This is where Shirley's father lives and calls them to live with him. The house is in Brooklyn, NY. They have a land lady who eventually teaches Shirley how to play piano. The apartment is smaller but it fits the family just fine.

P.S.8

Public School 8 is where a major part of the story takes place. This is the American school that Shirley attends and where she learns how to be American and Chinese. She makes friends and learns from teachers. Shirley attends fifth and sixth grade at P.S.8.

Boiler room

This the basement where all the machinery that keeps the apartments running is, in the Wong's apartment building. Shirley is a little nervous down there alone but her father loves all the American gadgets down there.

Senora's Apt.

This the land lady's apartment where Shirley takes piano lessons from her and eventually watches the place for Senora while she visits her daughter back in her homeland.



Themes and Motifs

Family

This is a theme that is a constant to Shirley's changing life. In China the Wong house is populated by the many family members of the Wong family. All Shirley's friends were family when they lived in China - no outside friends. In America, Shirley has a chance to make real friends and is suddenly not surrounded by all her family. This causes her to have to actually be social and exert herself.

This underscores the many roles that family can play for the individual. First, of course, there is the biological relation providing genetic similarities between members. Everyone shares many of the same characteristics, and those with slight variations are accepted into the group. In America, Shirley's differences are more pronounced. Not everyone looks like her, or acts like her. Many of the things that had been intrinsic to her because of her close family, don't serve her now in her new home.

Family, then, is extended to encompass more than blood relations when Shirley reaches America. This is true when she meets her piano teacher and becomes very close to her. In many respects, they not only become friends, but Shirley views her as she might an Aunt. Later, Senora provides additional support and encouragement to Shirley as she tries to fit in at school and to make friends.

Additionally, the reader sees another role of Family being offered. First, there is the support that family offer to one another. The first few months of school are difficult for Shirley and her mother and father are there for her. They tell her that they understand how difficult it must be and offer suggestions for trying to fit in. Her mother, especially, must be patient as she also has to learn what is expected and is not expected from a child in America.

The idea of Family is also explored in the sense that they give a person a sense of identity. In China, she was Sixth Cousin. In America, she is Shirley Wong. This switching from one name to the other is also indicative of the shifting between what is expected of her and the role that family is going to play in her life. In China all of her friends and acquaintances were, for the most part, all family. She is reminded of her family in China when her grandfather sends Mooncakes to them. She also remembers and tells her grandfather's story.

Isolation

This theme is demonstrated throughout the beginning of the book, as Shirley is isolated from the outside with her family surrounding her all the time. In America she is truly isolated since she speaks very little English. Eventually, she overcomes this barrier and assimilates into the class once she makes friends who help her.



What this theme examines throughout the story is how a person can be isolated. First, there is the isolation of language, especially if a person doesn't speak or understand the language of the country they are in. The ability to communicate, or not communicate, and how isolated it makes a person is driven home to Shirley when she goes down to the corner store to buy cigarettes for her father and realizes that she doesn't even know how to ask for them in the store. Then she is lost trying to get home and can't ask anyone for help or directions.

Secondly, a person can become isolated, as Shirley finds, when one doesn't understand the culture. She is culturally isolated because things that were acceptable or unacceptable in China are completely different in America. This is especially true when she goes to Emily's house and is shocked to hear Emily call her parents by their first names. In China this would be seen as a sign of disrespect.

Then, there is the isolation of not having any friends. Because Shirley doesn't speak the language, understand the culture, or any of the games, she is not able to develop any common ground with anyone and thus make a connection that would help her make friends. It is her lack of understanding of the situation with Mabel that works out in her favor when she unwittingly stands up to the class bully. Mabel misinterprets Shirley's behavior as bravery, which ends up winning Shirley Mabel's respect and friendship. This is the beginning of the end of Shirley's isolation.

Friendship

The theme of Friendship figures prominently in the novel. This is because it is something that Shirley desperately wants but is unable to have for the first few months that she's in America. Previously, all of Shirley's friends, when she was in China, were all family members, her cousins and nieces and nephews. Now, in America, she's having to make friends with people who aren't related to her, who look and act differently from her.

When she starts school, the language barrier keeps her from making friends. In fact, she realizes that she can't speak to anyone, let alone understand them, and this causes her to be very withdrawn. She is unable to make friends, and thus, the theme of Friendship as something that requires communication is offered to the reader. It is miscommunication and lack of understanding that inadvertently ends up making Shirley friends when she is seen standing up to the class bully.

This misinterpretation is a happy mistake for Shirley in that it makes the other students see her in a different light. Though she is not aware of what it is that she had done, suddenly people are more open to accepting her into their group. What the author seems to be saying about friendship is that one needs to reach out to others, rather than waiting for others to reach out, first.

Next, Friendship is demonstrated when the next year Shirley meets Emily, a new girl in the class. Remembering how it felt to be the new girl, Shirley makes a point of getting to



know Emily right away. They become close friends and Shirley realizes that her friendship with Mabel, while it helped her to be accepted into the group, wasn't a true friendship. With Emily, Shirley sees what a true friend should be like, and the reader sees Emily support Shirley, even sacrificing so that Shirley can be happy.

American Dream

This is a major theme in the book. Without the American Dream Shirley's father wouldn't have sought out work in America and Shirley wouldn't have made the friends she did. Shirley relies on this once she realizes in America foreign kids can become anyone and anything they want if they try hard enough.

The motif of 'hard work paying off' is a constant within the American Dream theme. This is exemplified, not only in the classroom, and with Shirley in her attempt to fit in and learn as the other children do, but in Jackie Robinson and his accomplishments. Shirley's father, for example, illustrates the hard work needed to get ahead. From his hard work the reader sees the Wong family slowly beginning to enjoy better living conditions than they did in China.

However, her understanding of the American Dream is a little naive and immature. She believes that the American Dream pertains to anything and anyone, and she doesn't understand that if she works hard to play baseball why she shouldn't be able to play in the big leagues. Emily and the others explain it to her, and her understanding develops and deepens and she realizes that the American Dream pertains to things such as school work and careers.

However, this doesn't stop her from continuing to pursue those things that are attainable goals for her. With this new knowledge she is able to apply it to not only hobbies, but in helping her family assimilate into the culture faster. She also begins to devise ways of 'tapping into' the American Dream, herself, when she is older. Her best friend helps her to see that the American Dream is different for everyone because no one person is alike on the planet. The idea that this partnering of diversity with the American Dream make a person strong is inferred throughout the text.

Perseverance

Perseverance is a theme that shows Shirley how to keep going even though it is tough and she doesn't understand many things in the strange land she now has to call home. Shirley has a great sense of Perseverance in that she learned a poem to recite even though it was a child's song. Her determination to try and do the same work that everyone else was required to do showed her desire to fit in.

Perseverance is also shown through her piano lessons, her determination to not be afraid of Senora, and to continue to try to make friends at school even when it seemed obvious to her that no one wanted to take the time or trouble to get to know her. She



didn't give up, and continued to extend herself when she was almost certain to meet with defeat.

A good example of perseverance was Shirley's determination to recite a poem, just like the other children, even if it wasn't the one that they were doing. While it made everyone laugh, because of her selection, the point was that she made the attempt at all. Though she didn't understand the language when she arrived, she continued to learn and to attempt her studies, even though she was at a distinct disadvantage.

Both of Shirley's parents show perseverance in that her father had secured a good job and yet, also offered to take over the apartment duties while Senora was away. Additionally, Shirley's mother showed perseverance in that she continued to support and maintain the home and the family, attempting to keep the best traditions from home, while accepting and incorporating the American ways, as well. In the end, though it is difficult at first for all of them, none of them give up and continue to move forward toward their goals.

Styles

Point of View

The point of view is first person from the perspective of a child. The reader only knows what is going on in the protagonist's head and follows her through her day to day life. Since the main character is a child the reader gets an unfiltered view of how the world is seen from this vantage point.

Language and Meaning

The language is simplistic and easily accessible to the young reader. Geared for the intermediate reader, the book uses lower lexicon and the sentence structures are simpler in nature. There are several foreign words that are used, but are presented in context so that even the struggling reader can understand what its meant.

Structure

The book is told in linear fashion with twelve chapters. At the beginning of every chapter is a little picture depicting what is to be happening in the chapter, as well as randomly appearing within certain chapters, much as what would appear in a diary or scrapbook.



Quotes

At the store a skinny man with a big red nose welcomed her with a smile. Encouraged, she opened her mouth wide to pronounce her first English words for an American. "Rukee Sike!" But instead of giving her the cigarettes, he rattled off a string of nonsensical sounds. What if she couldn't make him understand?
-- Shirley Wong (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 115)

Importance: This shows how Shirley realizes the language barrier problems in America. At this part she is trying to get cigarettes and thinks she is more prepared for life in America, and then this happens and puts things into perspective for her.

Your teacher suggests we take you to a doctor. She thinks there is something wrong with your eyes.
-- The Principal (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 45)

Importance: The quote shows that Shirley was having problems with the social aspects of America such as winking. Shirley didn't get the hang of it so she blinked constantly. This made the teachers think she had an eye problem.

Shirley waited for complete silence. Then, clearing her throat, she began. At once, they were giggling. Even Mrs. Rappaport.
-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 27)

Importance: This is Shirley's second attempt to fit in and recite a poem. Her language barrier and social understanding causes her to recite the Mickey Mouse anthem instead of a poem. She doesn't know what it is but everyone laughs and this causes her to feel more isolated than before.

Shirley opened her mouth then quickly thought better of speaking, and just shook her head. No matter how long the sentence, on the day of her release Mabel, as surely as tigers devour flesh, would still be around. Around to get revenge if Shirley Temple Wong dropped even the tiniest hint of what happened that afternoon.
-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 42)

Importance: This shows how Shirley perceives Mabel as the bully and is ruled through her fear of Mabel's retaliation. She is afraid that Mabel will hurt her if she tells the police who hit her.

Once Shirley earns her respect, Mabel reaches out and befriends her.
-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 48)

Importance: This shows that by Shirley not ratting out Mabel she earned Mabel's respect and the two became friends. Shirley's first friend.



You, Spaghetti Snit? You, Kosher Creep? You, Damp Drawers? You, Brown Blubber?
You, Dog Breath? You, Puerto Rican Coconut?
-- Mabel (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 72)

Importance: Mabel called everyone names and slight racial slurs to bring everyone down to an equal field. This allows for Shirley to be able to finally fit in and make friends.

Everyday things like the tiniest cockroach or a gentle tap on the back made her shriek.
-- Shirley (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 3)

Importance: This shows that her mother gets scared very easily. This is used to contrast how level headed she becomes in the face of real problems to add a sort of comical side to her mother.

Never forget China or lose her Chinese.
-- Mama (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 7)

Importance: This is towards Shirley using English as her instinctive dialect. Mama Wong becomes nervous that she will lose her Chinese heritage and forget who she is.

Be extra good.
-- Mama (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 13)

Importance: This is to tell Shirley that she needs to represent all of China to the Americans, to basically be an ambassador to her classmates.

Grandmother was the matriarch of the House of Wong. What she ordered was always done. What she said was always so.
-- Shirley (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 38)

Importance: This shows the matriarchal family of the Wong Hierarchy. Grandmother has the most say of anyone in the family. She is the leader.