The Kitchen God's Wife Study Guide

The Kitchen God's Wife by Amy Tan

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Contents

Introduction

Amy Tan wrote *The Kitchen God's Wife* about her mother, Daisy. Most of Winnie's story in the novel is drawn from Daisy's life, including the difficult life and marriage she left behind in pre-communist China. The presentation of Winnie's story, as she tells her story to Pearl, is reminiscent of the oral tradition. Tan, like Pearl, had never given much thought to her mother's life in China, and she was amazed at what she learned.

When Tan started on her second novel, she wanted to avoid rehashing material and ideas from her successful first novel, *The Joy Luck Club.* She sequestered herself with soothing music and incense, realizing that solitude was her surest path to the next novel. Although she tried numerous times to write about something different, the story in *The Kitchen God's Wife* cried out to be told, and Tan realized that the pursuit of diversity was not a good reason to write about one topic over another. Her mother's eagerness to have her story fictionalized was also a major influence.

And so, *The Kitchen God's Wife* shares certain themes with *The Joy Luck Club.* Both *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* portray strained relationships between immigrant mothers and their American daughters. The theme of alienation also appears in both works. Despite its similarities to the first novel, the second novel won applause from Tan's readers and critics. Her novels contain a multitude of stories that converge into a cohesive work, and Tan is admired for her ability to move from the past to the present in her storytelling.

Author Biography

Amy Tan was born in 1952 to first-generation Chinese- American parents. At her birth, Tan was given the Chinese name An-Mai, meaning "Blessing of America." Her father, John, was an electrical engineer and a volunteer Baptist minister who came to America in 1947. Her mother, Daisy, was a medical technician who had fled China in 1949 to escape an unhappy arranged marriage, leaving three daughters behind. In 1967, Tan's older brother, Peter, died of brain cancer, and, within a year, her father died of the same illness. After consulting a Chinese fortune teller, Daisy left the "evil" house and took her surviving children, Amy and John, to Europe.

The Tans settled in Switzerland, where Amy completed high school. It was an unhappy time for her; she felt like an outsider and was still grieving and angry over the losses in her family. Because being upright had not saved her brother and father, Tan decided to be rebellious and wild. Her friends were drug dealers, and she almost eloped to Australia with a mental patient who claimed to be a German army deserter.

When the Tans moved to Oregon, Daisy chose a college for her daughter and planned her pre-med curriculum. She was deeply disappointed when her daughter changed her major to English. In 1970, Tan moved to California to be closer to her boyfriend, Lou DiMattei. She transferred to San Jose State University and graduated in 1973. The next year, she and DiMattei married, and she received her Master's degree in English and linguistics.

As a freelance technical writer, Tan was highly successful, but she routinely worked ninety-hour weeks. Seeking to cure her compulsive working, she took up jazz piano and joined a writers' group. She took a trip to China with her mother in 1987 to connect with her Chinese heritage, an element that was lacking in her childhood. She soon realized that her best writing came from her Chinese- American perspective. Her short stories were published, and a planned collection of short fiction soon became the enormously popular *The Joy Luck Club,* published in 1989. The novel stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nine months and received the 1989 Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Best Fiction and the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adult Readers Award. The novel was also a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

When *The Kitchen God's Wife* was published in 1991, critics and readers praised the novel as being at least as good as the first one. Her first two novels established Tan as a serious writer whose unique perspective and storytelling ability captivate readers and impress critics. Although both novels center on mother-daughter relationships and intergenerational conflicts, Tan is resistant to being dubbed an expert on family relationships. Further, she does not want to be categorized as an ethnic writer because she seeks to portray universal themes and wants critics to evaluate her work on its merits, rather than as sub-genre writing.

Plot Summary

Chapters One-Two

The first two chapters of *The Kitchen God's Wife* are narrated by Pearl Brandt, the daughter of Winnie Louie, a Chinese woman who immigrated to the United States in adulthood. Winnie has convinced Pearl to attend an engagement banquet for her cousin in San Francisco. Reluctantly, Pearl agrees and then stays in the city an extra day to attend the funeral of Auntie Du.

During the engagement banquet, Winnie's close friend Helen tells Pearl she (Helen) has a brain tumor and will be forced to reveal Pearl's secret (that she has multiple sclerosis) to her mother unless she tells her herself. She hints that her mother also has secrets she may share with her daughter.

The relationship between Winnie and Pearl is strained because the Americanized daughter and her immigrant mother have little in common. The one thing they both understand is their grief, years previously, over the loss of Pearl's father, Jimmy, who was Winnie's great love. At the funeral for Auntie Du, Pearl has a breakthrough in which she finally cries for Jimmy. In her will, Auntie Du leaves Pearl her altar to the Kitchen God, a minor deity who, as a mortal, was an abusive husband to his virtuous wife. As a deity, he reports to the Jade Emperor about who has been good and who has been bad.

Chapters Three-Ten

Helen has told Winnie, too, of her illness and of the need to bring secrets into the open, so Winnie asks her daughter to sit with her in the kitchen while she tells all of her secrets. Chapters three through twenty-four are told from Winnie's point of view.

Winnie begins her story by describing her mother, the vain second wife of her wealthy father. When Winnie is six, her mother takes her on a funfilled trip into the city, where they share wonderful experiences and see exciting things. The next day, Winnie's mother mysteriously disappears, and Winnie is sent to live with an uncle and his family so as not to remind her father of his missing wife. Winnie is unhappy in the new family because they are not as wealthy and treat her like a guest instead of like a family member. She makes friends with her cousin Peanut, a girl about the same age as Winnie. The two grow into adolescence together, carrying on like sisters.

During a New Year's festival, Winnie and Peanut go in search of trinkets and fortunes when they meet a charming young man named Wen Fu. He flirts with Peanut and later courts her. Winnie is suspicious of Wen Fu but says nothing. When Wen Fu finds out that Winnie's family is much wealthier than Peanut's, he proposes to Winnie. Despite Peanut's initial resentment, Winnie accepts and seeks her father's approval for the match. He agrees and explains to his daughter that when she is a wife, she will have to be obedient. He then sends one of his wives into town with Winnie to buy things for her

dowry. It is a spectacular spending spree, and Winnie cannot believe the expense being put into her dowry. She later learns that the other daughters were given dowries ten times the size of hers and that her father knew that Wen Fu was from a questionable family.

Soon after the marriage, Wen Fu signs up with the military, as China recruits men to defend their country against the invading Japanese. The newlyweds move to Hangchow where Wen Fu trains as a member of the American Volunteer Group led by American pilot Claire Chennault. Winnie eventually discovers that her husband was only accepted because he used his deceased brother's name and credentials and that he is a coward who retreats when his fleet engages in air battle. Because of his social standing, however, no one challenges him. Wen Fu becomes abusive toward his new wife, often humiliating her sexually. Still, she tries to be a good wife, and her developing friendship with Helen, the wife of another pilot (Long Jiaguo), becomes her only supportive relationship.

Chapters Eleven-Nineteen

The pilots begin to fly in battle, and their numbers begin to dwindle. Finally, Wen Fu, Winnie, Helen, and Jiaguo flee to distant parts of the country with the air force group. Along the way, they learn of the terrible defeats China is suffering, and they feel fortunate to be alive. Traveling in her last months of pregnancy, Winnie anticipates the birth of her first child and is heartbroken when the baby girl is stillborn. Meanwhile, Wen Fu has become even crueler, especially after he suffers an injury in an auto accident that is his fault. At a military party, Winnie meets a Chinese-American man named Jimmy Louie, and she is immediately drawn to him. They dance and then go their separate ways.

Winnie gives birth to a second daughter, who becomes very ill months later. She goes to get the doctor, who is playing mah jongg with Wen Fu. Wen Fu refuses to let the doctor tend to his daughter, and she dies. When Winnie becomes pregnant again, she has a boy, and she vows that he will never be like his father. She ends several subsequent pregnancies by abortion because she cannot bear the idea of carrying another of Wen Fu's children. Her attempts to secure a divorce from him only anger him, causing him, more than once, to tear up the papers and rape her.

Chapters Twenty-Twenty-Six

After the war, Winnie and Wen Fu part ways with Helen and Jiaguo. Winnie looks forward to getting back to her family and telling her father how terribly Wen Fu has treated her. When they arrive, however, Winnie's father is a frail man who, having suffered a stroke, is unable to speak. Wen Fu's family moves in and begins selling off the old man's precious belongings, as he sits powerless to stop them. Unable to stand her life any longer, Winnie seeks out Peanut, who has escaped her own unhappy marriage. On her way to see Peanut, Winnie runs into Jimmy, and they sit and talk.

Winnie sends her son to live with Helen and Jiaguo until she can get away from Wen Fu, but the child dies during a plague while he is away.

When Winnie's escape plans fall through, Jimmy suggests that she come and live with him. She does, but when word reaches Wen Fu, Jimmy is sent out of the country. He promises to come back for Winnie in two years. For her part in the incident, Winnie is arrested for deserting her husband and causing her son's death, and she is given the choice between prison and returning to Wen Fu. She chooses prison but is released early thanks to Helen and Auntie Du. She immediately contacts Jimmy, and he asks her to come to America and be his wife. She makes plans to flee the country, including tricking Wen Fu and his new wife into signing divorce papers. Wen Fu finds her, tears up the papers, rapes her, and steals her tickets. Helen arrives and helps Winnie overpower him. They throw his pants out the window and retrieve the tickets. Winnie arrives safely in America just before the communists take over and no one is allowed to leave China. A little less than nine months later, Pearl is born, meaning that her father is probably Wen Fu, not Jimmy.

In response to this dramatic story, Pearl tells her mother about her disease. Winnie promises to help Pearl fight the disease and wonders if it is somehow Wen Fu's fault. Later, Helen reveals that she does not really have a brain tumor. She made up the story so that Winnie and Pearl would tell each other their secrets. Winnie buys a new deity for the Kitchen God's altar, only this one is a woman. She names her Sorrowfree and prays to her for her daughter's health.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story opens with Pearl introducing her extended family: her mother, Winnie, her Auntie Helen (first married to her mother's brother, Kun, now to Uncle Henry Kwong) and their children: Mary, Frank and Roger, whom they call Bao-Bao, which means precious baby. He is 31 and getting married for the third time. Winnie has phoned Pearl with an invitation to his engagement party. Pearl does not want to go and tries to make excuses, but resigns herself out of a sense of duty.

Days later, Winnie calls Pearl to say Grand Auntie Du has died at 97, and her funeral will be the same weekend as the engagement party. Although Auntie Du is Helen's blood relative, Pearl thinks it is a bit strange that Winnie has always been her primary caretaker. She attributes it to the close relationship between Winnie and Helen, who went into business together 25 years ago – Ding Ho Flower Shop in Chinatown – when Helen was fired from her job and Pearl's father, Jimmy Louie, died.

Pearl's husband Phil can always be counted on to argue about doing things with the family out of a sense of obligation. It has been a source of contention in their marriage. He is also worried about the stress of an entire weekend with relatives on Pearl, who has multiple sclerosis. He accuses her of being fearful and guilty. She says he is selfish. She also believes, because he is not Chinese, that he cannot possibly understand the countless ways in which her behavior is dictated by her culture and how hard she tries to change. They have two daughters, Tessa, 8, and Cleo, 3.

Phil makes one last attempt to alleviate some of the stress by booking them into a hotel, but Winnie protests, so they settle in with her. Phil takes the girls to the zoo while Pearl goes to the flower shop to help her mother with funeral preparations. Her mother has not asked directly, but hinted that Pearl should be there. Pearl is stopped by Mr. Hong, owner of a store known as "the shop of the gods" for the statues of Chinese deities sold there. Mr. Hong gives Pearl a package for her mother. When Pearl enters the flower shop, she hears her mother arguing in Chinese with someone on the phone. Pearl is amazed to learn she is protesting a $3 shipping charge, but then wonders why it surprises her. She looks around the shop and notes that not a dime has been invested in its renovation or maintenance. As they turn their attention to the floral arrangements, however, Pearl admires her mother's handiwork. The funeral wreaths are lush and full.

Winnie opens the package from Mr. Hong. It contains "spirit money," one hundred million dollars in play money that the Chinese believe the dead can use to bribe their way into heaven. When Pearl looks on in amusement, Winnie tells Pearl she does not do it out of belief, but out of respect.

At the engagement dinner, Pearl's least favorite cousin, Mary, greets them along with her husband Doug and children, Jennifer and Michael. Mary found out about Pearl's

illness when she overheard her husband and a doctor friend discussing the diagnosis. She has confronted Pearl about her illness and continues to bring it up in ways that irritate her. Mary also told her mother, Auntie Helen, which means her secret is not safe. Pearl is trying to balance the damage done with the history of their friendship. Mary and Doug introduced Pearl and Phil, who were matron of honor and best man at their wedding.

Pearl has been in remission for some time, but is reminded of her illness every time she sees or hears from her mother. She does not want to tell her because her mother is sure to carry on about how she might have prevented this catastrophe by applying the appropriate Chinese mumbo jumbo. Pearl has seen Winnie do this following the death of her husband from stomach cancer when Pearl was fourteen. She berated herself for not recognizing The Nine Bad Fates: if eight bad things happen, the ninth will be fatal. Winnie believes that had she been more vigilant, she could have saved her husband from that ninth bad fate.

Steeped in Chinese superstition, Winnie believes that every event is significant and that nothing is an accident. After Pearl had a miscarriage, Winnie cited any number of causes: coffee, jogging, not eating enough. The next time Pearl got pregnant, she delayed telling her mother until the danger of a second miscarriage had passed. Unfortunately, Helen later let Winnie know that she had been told of the pregnancy much sooner.

The engagement dinner is as bad as Pearl imagined it would be. Winnie and Helen get on each other's nerves. Phil tries to make polite conversation. Pearl pretends they are still friends with Mary and Doug and thinks about how distant she and her mother have become.

Just when she thinks it cannot get any worse, Pearl is pulled aside by Auntie Helen who says she has a brain tumor and is dying. She fears that she will not be able to fly to heaven weighted down with a secret such as Pearl's illness, so Pearl must tell her mother or she will. Pearl reluctantly agrees to tell her.

At Winnie's that night, Pearl cannot do it. Her mother fusses over Phil and Pearl as if they are children, asking if they are warm enough, if they brushed their teeth. Pearl rejects her mother's ministrations, but then feels sad as her mother shuffles away.

Chapter 1 Analysis

This story is a fictionalized account of the author's mother's life, but events and customs depicted are true. Family, tradition and duty are cornerstones of the Chinese culture. The Chinese literally worship their ancestors. Parents give each child a name that reflects their hopes and dreams for that child in its meaning. Thus, we are introduced to Pearl, the protagonist, whose name describes her as someone's treasure, and her cousin Roger, called Bao-Bao (precious baby), a grown man who nonetheless continues to behave as a spoiled infant.

Immigrants to the United States often Americanized their names to blend into the new culture. These families were no different. The eldest, Grand Auntie Du, and Aunt Helen's late husband Kun are the only family members known by their Chinese names. Winnie has named her daughter Pearl, which is definite nod to tradition. Helen, on the other hand, has named her children Mary, Frank and Roger.

Right away, Winnie is set apart from her own contemporaries as someone with a measure of respect for the old ways, someone interested in preserving something of the life she knew in China. It is also evident from the outset that her daughter does not share her interest in their heritage. She has named her daughters Tessa and Cleo, and she has married a non-Chinese man. Yet, Pearl has not been able to shake the sense of duty that has been instilled in her.

Another break with tradition that bears some significance is mentioned in this chapter. The Chinese culture is one that venerates age and obligates family members to care for one another in all circumstances. Yet, Winnie, not Helen, has been Auntie Du's caretaker, which indicates a special bond and an arrangement that Helen understands. Otherwise, it would be unthinkable.

Tan paints a portrait of the strained relationships between immigrant mother and American daughter in this work as well as her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. It is an alienation born of the struggle to respect heritage yet blend into the new culture. When her daughter does not support a mother's traditions, the mother feels a lack of respect, a measure of rejection. Pearl does not fully understand why she rejects her mother and mourns the distance between them.

Helen, who threatens to tell Pearl's secret, is providing a catalyst that will bring the two together or drive an even larger wedge between them.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Winnie and Helen have left early to decorate the funeral parlor when Phil has second thoughts about taking the girls. Pearl reassures him, saying it will be a closed-casket service.

As they enter the funeral parlor, Pearl and Phil are given black armbands to wear. Pearl feels guilty pretending to be grieved and tries to remember Auntie Du. She cannot come up with much, only that she smelled like mothballs and kept old Chinese candy and jerky in dusty tins.

Bao-Bao hands them candy and a red envelope of lucky money, which neither Phil nor Pearl know what to do with. Pearl is amused and horrified to find Uncle Henry videotaping the funeral. They pass a dozen mourners on the way to their seats, looking for familiar faces, until Cleo exclaims, "Daddy, there's a lady sleeping up there! And her dinner's on fire!"

Auntie Du, dressed in fine clothes and jewels, lies in an open casket. Before her is spread a nine-course Chinese dinner, provisions for her trip to heaven. All are encompassed by swirls of smoke from a dozen incense sticks, providing an "ethereal stairway to the next world."

Pearl confronts her mother about the open casket. Winnie has misunderstood or is pretending she has. "You like? Clothes I chose for her, all new." She then goes on to point out her frugality in not choosing the best wood for the casket and assuring Pearl that the jewelry will be removed before burial.

There is a portrait of Auntie Du, which looks like a blow-up of a passport photo taken fifty years ago. In the stillness, Pearl feels as if they are waiting for something, perhaps for her aunt to manifest herself as a ghost. It brings back a childhood memory, of the first time she thought she saw a ghost, coming out of a jack o' lantern when she was five. She remembers that her mother believed her. Her father, a Christian pastor, believed only in the Holy Ghost and demonstrated to Pearl that all she had seen was smoke from a smoldering candle. Pearl recalled the look on her mother's face, one of complete betrayal.

Winnie is describing for Pearl the food prepared for Auntie Du and who made each dish. She praises her own cooking while criticizing Helen's. Pearl then notices the banner above the casket and asks Winnie to translate the Chinese characters. "Hope that your next life is long and prosperous," she replies.

Hollow wooden knocking sounds followed by a ringing bell and chanting announce the entrance of two Buddhist monks with shaved heads, dressed in saffron-colored robes. One monk has a flattened cheek and misshapen ear. Pearl whispers that he must have

been in a car accident. "Cultural Revolution," Winnie whispers back. The other monk is a nun with scabs on her face. Pearl asks if she was in the Cultural Revolution too. However, her mother tells her the girl is too young.

Some of the mourners turn out to be professional mourners, hired by Helen, to cry and act as if they do not want the dead person to leave. Pearl is incredulous. Winnie explains to her that it is how you show respect and, on a more practical note that might appeal to Pearl, she says it might be a good living for these women.

The banner falls. Winnie is horrified and immediately seeks out the funeral director and rebukes him for letting Auntie Du's "luck fall down." As the funeral director bows repeatedly, Pearl wonders if he is showing respect or if he has learned how to please Chinese customers.

Everyone is given a stick of incense and begins to circle the casket chanting "Amitaba." Pearl feels silly taking part in a ritual she does not understand and recalls a similar circumstance. The only Asian in a Zen Center, she had waited impatiently for a sermon to begin only to realize that she should have joined the others some time ago in meditation practice.

Pearl bows to her aunt and feels guilty again because she also does not believe in what she is doing. She remembers feeling that way when her father baptized her and she did not believe she was saved. When she took communion and did not believe the grape juice was the blood of Christ. When she prayed for a cure for her father and he died anyway. Suddenly, she begins to cry. She and her mother know the tears are for her father, a loss she has been unable to grieve.

Pearl then thinks of her father's funeral. She was so full of anger and cynicism that there was no room for sadness. She did not know the sick, frail, helpless man who died. Her father had been charming, lively and strong. She had been her father's "perfect Pearl" in contrast to the irritating grain of sand she seemed to be to her mother. At the funeral, her mother tried to make her cry by slapping her repeatedly. Pearl ran from the funeral parlor and missed the service. Her relationship with her mother had been difficult ever since.

When Auntie Du's funeral is over, Winnie tries to get Pearl to talk about her tears. Pearl hopes to end their visit then by saying she is not going to the cemetery. Winnie makes her excuses to Helen and says she will go, too. Pearl does not understand everything they say in Chinese, but is sure her mother is not telling her exactly what is said.

Phil drives them to Winnie's, hinting that he would like to get on the road home as quickly as possible. As they drive through Winnie's neighborhood built in the twenties, Pearl notes how each family put its stamp of individuality on the two-story row houses with siding or paint. Winnie had chosen the ladder and must have gotten an incredible deal from a contractor who painted her house Day-Glo pink. As they drop her off, Winnie asks when she will see them again. When they do not say, she says she will see them for Bao-Bao's wedding the next month.

The girls say goodbye to their grandmother, calling her "Ha-bu," Shanghainese for grandmother. She promises them pot stickers and moon cakes for the Chinese New Year. They drive away but return when the girls have to go to the bathroom. Winnie then remembers she has not given Pearl her inheritance from Auntie Du.

In an effort to prolong the visit, Winnie first serves Pearl a cup of tea. It is tea that cost Auntie Du one hundred dollars a pound, Winnie says. Auntie Du explained it this way: "If I buy myself the cheap tea, then I am saying my whole life has not been worth something better." She bought three pounds, adding that if she bought just a little it was like saying she would die soon. Then, several months before her death, Auntie Du gave the tea to Winnie, telling her that some things could not wait and she wanted to see her happy. She called her "Syau Ning," little person, from the days "when we first knew each other."

Pearl learns that Auntie Du has left her a Chinese altar, which Tessa thinks is a dollhouse. The red-lacquered crèche looks like a small stage with two ornate columns, two electric candles of gold and red plastic and Christmas tree bulbs for flames. Gold Chinese characters decorate the wooden panels on either side. Winnie translates: "Jye Shiang Ru Yi" is "All kinds of luck. All that you wish," and she identifies the cartoon-like picture in the frame as the "Kitchen God."

She goes on to explain the levels of Chinese deities and says Kitchen God is like a store manager, important but with many bosses above him. He was once a rich farmer named Zhang, a lucky man blessed with a hardworking wife named Guo. He had all he could ask for, but was not satisfied. He brought a woman named Lady Li into his home. She chased away his wife.

Zhang and Lady Li squandered all and when everything was gone, she left him for another man. Zhang became a beggar. One day, he fainted from hunger and exhaustion. When he awoke, he found himself in the kitchen of a prosperous woman. The girl tending the fire said her generous mistress always cared for those less fortunate.

As the lady of the house approached, Zhang saw it was his own wife. In shame, he cast himself into the fire. Guo tried to put out the fire with her tears, but it was too late. Her husband's ashes flew to heaven in three puffs of smoke.

There, the Jade Emperor heard the story. Because Zhang admitted his wrongdoing towards his wife, he was made Kitchen God watching over everyone's behavior, then reporting on who deserved good or bad luck. Phil pokes fun, saying he is like Santa Claus, but Winnie says no, he is a spy, and that others must give things to him – tea, oranges, whiskey, cigarettes – to show respect.

Then Winnie tries to rationalize why Auntie Du should worship a god that was once a man who cheated on his wife. His wife was the good one, after all. She concludes that Auntie Du must have been afraid to give up this god worshipped in her family for generations. Winnie suggests finding a more suitable God and removes the picture. On

the drive home, Pearl wonders what kind of god her mother will choose for her. She begins to cry again, when she discovers her mother has tucked a picture of her father into a bag for her.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Auntie Du's funeral is a veritable lesson in Chinese custom and respect, and how strange it all appears to outsiders. In this case, the outsiders are Winnie's own family members. Her granddaughters mistake the deceased, her incense and her provisions for the trip to heaven as a sleeping lady whose dinner is on fire. Phil does not understand the significance of candy and lucky money. Even Pearl does not know the language or history of her culture. She asks her mother to translate Chinese characters and does not know when the Cultural Revolution took place. Pearl is also a bit unnerved by circumstances such as the funeral and meditation practice in which she is expected to know what to do simply because she is Asian.

Winnie, who assured Pearl of a closed/clothed casket service, has probably misunderstood on purpose so that her granddaughters would be exposed to the traditional ceremony. Pearl, at least on some level, knows this. It reminds her of the way in which her mother embraced her father's Christian traditions and how felt betrayed she felt when he did not accord her beliefs the same respect.

She thinks, too, about her father's funeral, which was the turning point in her relationship with her mother. She felt his loss deeply because he had always been happy with her in contrast to her mother who never seemed to be. Nonetheless, when she did not mourn in the ways expected of her, her mother slapped her repeatedly to make her appear sad. Pearl did not care about appearances or tradition. Her suffering was real, and her mother did not understand that. She cries at Auntie Du's funeral for the loss of her father and the loss of her relationship with her mother.

As they part company, Winnie's granddaughters call her a Shanghainese name for grandmother. She is thrilled and begins to promise them traditional dishes in celebration of the Chinese New Year, trying once again to instill some of their heritage. Winnie serves Pearl a cup of the tea Auntie Du gave her along with a lesson in treating herself like the person of value that she is.

Tessa and Cleo mistake the traditional Chinese altar as a dollhouse. It is obvious they do not keep one in their homes and have never even seen one. Winnie translates the Chinese characters and tells them the legend of the "Kitchen God." While the girls are fascinated, Phil pokes fun and Pearl is resistant. To prevent Pearl from turning the altar into a dollhouse for the girls, Winnie promises to find her a more suitable god. Interestingly enough, this captures Pearl's imagination.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In the days after Auntie Du's funeral, Winnie reflects on her long and contentious relationship with Helen, who thinks she makes good decisions, but is only lucky. They have been eating funeral leftovers for five days when Winnie insists they go grocery shopping.

At the Happy Super, Helen picks a fish from the bargain bin for only a dollar sixty-nine a pound. Winnie protests, pointing out that the fish is three days old and shows all signs of spoilage. Helen buys and cooks it. It is sweet and tender. A perfect example of luck, Winnie thinks, not a good decision.

The fish reminds Winnie of another fish she bought many years ago as a special treat for her beloved husband. It was a lucky fish and she had good news. Jimmy swallowed a bone with his first bite and had to have an operation. Her good news was that she had found a job. Her extra money would be enough to pay off the hospital bill in less than a year.

Winnie remembers a schoolmate from Shanghai with luck like Helen's. She was engaged, but contracted smallpox that scarred her face. Her marriage contract was voided. Years later, Winnie saw her again. She was the wife of a grocer with many jade bracelets and a big smile. She told Winnie that her former fiancé's family lost all when the communists took over and that he had committed suicide. "Lucky he didn't marry me," she said.

Winnie had the opposite luck with men. She had refused to marry a good man, Lin, and married a bad one, Wen Fu. She wonders how different her life might have been had she had a mother to advise her. Years later, she met Lin, now a rich doctor with a beautiful wife. If she had married him, Winnie thought, she would not have become the kind of wife who prayed the Japanese would kill her husband or the kind of mother who could not grieve when her children died. In addition, if she had married Lin she would never have married Jimmie and would not miss him so much.

Winnie had begun to think of her life in two ways: the way it happened and the way it did not. She concludes that it is like choosing a fish in a tank. How do you know if it is good until you have tasted it?

If she had chosen the other life, Helen would not know all of her secrets. One of the biggest secrets is that Helen is not her sister-in-law. The lie they tell is that Helen was married to Winnie's brother, Kun, who was killed in the war. Kun was really Winnie's half-brother, who was beheaded by the Revolutionaries. The family had a history of lying about Kun to find favor with the authorities, saying their enemies had killed him.

Their shared past is something Winnie doesn't want to forget because she believes it still holds lessons for her, but Helen says the past can't be changed so it is useless to dwell on it. Winnie does not think Helen really believes that because the two of them "have changed the past many times, for many reasons."

When she came to America, Winnie planned to put it all behind her, but Helen wanted to come, too. Helen said Winnie owed her, so Winnie had lied to immigration officials, saying that Helen was her sister, born to one of her father's five wives. However, when Helen arrived, Winnie could not repeat the story to church friends so she made her a sister-in-law.

Winnie does not enjoy Helen's company, opinions or character, but feels closer to her than any sister. She feels they have been joined by fates and secrets. Now, Helen tells Winnie over the fish supper that she plans to tell those secrets.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Luck and fate are significant elements in Chinese lore. The Chinese are born under lucky or unlucky signs. Colors and numbers have varying degrees of luck. There are methods of decorating a home, worshipping the gods, eating certain foods that can change one's luck or fate.

Winnie's story about Helen's luck in picking a fish for their supper is a parable for their lives. Helen was born plain, poor and not very smart, but she has always triumphed over adversity. Winnie was pretty and bright, but fated to suffer many setbacks. She then recalls stories of unforeseeable luck.

She wonders how different her life might have been had she made other choices. She likens it to choosing fish in a tank and concludes that there is no way of knowing how a thing will turn out until you have tried it. Even Winnie did not fully realize her impact of her choice in giving up marriage to Lin for Wen Fu until she met the rich, successful Lin years later. Even as she laments that choice, she realizes that if she had married Lin she would not have married Jimmie Louie, who has obviously been the love of her life.

Winnie also contemplates the secret that Helen is not her sister-in-law. They have lied, but why? As she has done with Pearl, Helen now provides Winnie with a reason to talk with Pearl. If she does not, Helen will.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

After the fish dinner, Helen begins to brag about her son, aggravating Winnie who thinks her own son has a far better character. Helen recounts arguing with Mary about whether she should call her mother long distance for no reason. Winnie ignores the obvious devotion of a daughter who wants to hear her mother's voice and thinks Helen is ridiculous for wasting time and money by arguing about wasting time and money. Helen draws out from Winnie what she already knows, that Winnie and Pearl do not talk much. Pearl calls Winnie only when she wants something.

Helen then announces abruptly to Winnie that she no longer has to hide, producing a letter from a friend, Betty, who has written to tell them that Wen Fu is dead. Winnie had forbidden Helen to speak his name, so she refers to him as "that man." Winnie is glad he is dead, but disappointed to learn that he died on Christmas Day, thinking that celebrating his death on such a day would be wrong. Helen says she can sweep him out of her mind, sweep out all the lies by telling everyone the truth.

Winnie argues in vain, then goes home and cleans house to occupy her thoughts. In Pearl's room, she thinks of trying to raise Pearl to have manners and not ask for too much. Pearl is not raising her daughters that way. Winnie finds a boy's initials carved into the precious vanity she bought for Pearl. Pearl hated it. She remembers their fights. She then finds the "My Secret Treasures" box she gave Pearl when she was ten. Winnie is suddenly anxious to see if the contents can tell her more about her secretive daughter. She picks the lock with a bobby pin to find lipstick, jewelry, tampons, blue eye shadow, letters from a friend, and a card from her father's funeral with angry black marks through the date he died.

Winnie is comforted by this evidence that Pearl loved her father, but then she panics thinking Helen will tell Pearl her secrets. She thinks of Wen Fu and the children she lost during the war. How could she tell Pearl and her brother about them? Even if she stopped there, Pearl would know there was more. She would know what even Helen and Jimmie never knew, that Wen Fu was her real father.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Helen purposely irritates Winnie with stories about her children's devotion to her while pointing out that she and Pearl are not close. She is steering Winnie towards revealing herself to her daughter, thinking that perhaps if Pearl knew her mother better she would love and respect her as she should. Helen's news of Wen Fu's death is an assurance that the time is right for everything to be revealed.

Winnie is upset by the idea of uncovering so much she has buried within herself for so long. She tries hard not to think about it, but winds up doing little else. She re-examines

the way she raised Pearl in much the same way she was raised and feels rejected because Pearl is raising her own daughters differently. Winnie's feelings were also hurt when Pearl rejected the vanity. Pearl did not understand what Winnie intended by the gift. In addition, Winnie doesn't understand her daughter. She is searching for clues in her room when she finds the box that contains things Winnie had forbidden her to have along with a card from her father's funeral, which carries tangible evidence of her grief.

It is important to Winnie to know that Pearl loved and identified with the man she thought of as her father, the good and gentle Jimmie Louie. It was Wen Fu, in fact, who had fathered Pearl. It was a secret so repulsive that Winnie never told Jimmie or Helen, but Winnie knows it will come out now. What will it do to her already fragile relationship with Pearl? How will she tell her?

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Winnie pretends chest pains so Pearl will visit, then fixes her soup with pickled turnip and begins the story of her life.

Her own mother had disappeared when Winnie, then known as Wieli, was only six. She has few memories: her mother's long blue-black hair, a painting of her looking sad and lost, life in a fancy house in Shanghai with her father, Jiang, who owned cloth factories. He had other wives and children. All of them had fine things and servants.

Winnie recalled the beginning of the end, an argument between her mother and father. She remembers very little, just her mother saying "double second" and her father responding, "You can never change this." Winnie's mother returned to their rooms and told her they were going out for the day. She called her "Syin Ke," a term of great love and affection. Winnie reminds Pearl she called her that many times.

They went many places that day, Winnie says. Then, shortly after picking up a newspaper, they when into a movie theater where Winnie's mother carefully counted the rows, then whispered to a man before taking a seat next to him. Winnie fell asleep, but woke to find her mother still talking to the stranger. She sensed danger.

The next morning, her mother was gone, leaving behind a three-foot length of her hair. Winnie was questioned, but did not know where her mother had gone. The family then pretended that she had died and sent Winnie off to live with relatives on Tsungming Island.

Winnie then learned a little bit more about her mother from her aunts. Her mother was different from other Chinese girls, her feet were not bound and she was educated at a missionary school. She was from a wealthy, educated family and spoke English. New Aunt on Tsungming Island had gone to the same school and knew Winnie's mother. Old Aunt, who had been brought up the traditional way, denounced Winnie's mother and blamed education for her bad behavior.

Her mother's father had died when she was two, New Aunt told her. Her mother, Winnie's Habu, was in no hurry to have her daughter marry and leave her, so she prolonged her education. At 26, Winnie's mother had fallen in love with Lu, 29, another student and a Marxist. Her mother had kept a newspaper article about him all these years and it had been found in her things at the Shanghai house. Lu had been born to a fisherman in Shandong with no prospects of improving his situation until a Marxist who promised to teach him to read and write by a method called "One Thousand Characters in Ten Days" approached him.

Winnie's mother and Lu agreed to marry, but Habu forbid it. Winnie's mother threatened suicide and during prayer for her daughter, Habu believed her dead husband advised

her to see his friend Jiang Sao-yen. Jiang agreed to take her disrespectful daughter as his second wife. Lu urged her to resist and put an end to old marriage customs. He even told her the story of a girl who hung herself on her hair to avoid an unwanted marriage.

Winnie's mother became Jiang's second wife, replacing his dead second wife, a bad luck position. Nonetheless, the other wives envied her beauty, especially her black, black hair. Winnie speculates that may be the reason she left it behind – for them to fight over. Maybe she ran away to Lu, who might have been the man in the theater. However, if she were alive, why did she not come back for her daughter?

Chapter 5 Analysis

Winnie, who has pretended a possible heart attack, has Pearl's attention and begins to tell the story of her childhood to her captive audience. She begins by serving Pearl soup with pickled turnip, significant because the Japanese introduced this into the Chinese culture during the occupation. It foreshadows some of what is to come.

Winnie describes life in a wealthy Shanghai household where the patriarch, in keeping with tradition, has several wives and many children. Winnie's mother was a beautiful, unusually well educated woman, in the unlucky position of "double second," meaning she had replaced a dead second wife.

Winnie remembers that her mother loved and cared for her and called her a term of endearment that she, in turn, called Pearl. However, she was only six when her unhappy mother disappeared and she was sent to live with her father's relatives on Tsungming Island. They were able to answer some of her questions, but were divided as to what might have happened to her mother.

Winnie's mother had been sentenced to a life she did not want for being disobedient to her mother and rejecting her guidance. This knowledge had a profound impact on the way Winnie conducted herself and what she expected from her own daughter. Lu had urged Winnie's mother to abandon tradition, even suggesting that she die rather than submit to her arranged marriage. She had chosen life, such as it was. Did her fate come from following tradition or rejecting it? Did she love Winnie, then called Jiang Weili, and leave her in the care of people who could provide all for her? Did she not love Winnie enough to come back for her?

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Winnie tells Pearl she missed having a mother to advise her about matters of the heart. She reminds her of a boy she brought home once. The boy asked for beer and Pearl apologized for not having any to serve him. Winnie had cautioned Pearl that this boy thought of himself first and would consider her second, third, fourth and then not at all. "If you always tell him you are sorry now, you will always be sorry later," she had told her daughter.

Later, the boy broke Pearl's heart. Winnie likened the lesson learned to her relationship with Wen Fu, the man she told Pearl would later cause her to warn her daughter about men like him. Winnie then tells Pearl about Wen Fu, who was in love with her cousin Hua-zheng, New Aunt's daughter known as "peanut."

Winnie had lived with them for twelve years and had not seen her father in all that time, not even when she attended boarding school in Shanghai. She was not loved as much as Peanut or her boy cousins. When anyone noticed her at all, it was to criticize her. That changed shortly after the New Year's celebration in 1937.

The New Year is a time to change one's luck. It is a day of thinking. No dust or debt from the previous year can remain and not a bad word may be spoken for three days. New Aunt called for Peanut to show her the way a proper wife would clean, scold servants, and oversee the preparation of a meal. Winnie was not invited, but watched and learned. Winnie reminds Pearl that she tried to teach her these things as well.

Winnie's task that day was to mend the family's clothes. In her search for a quiet place to work, Winnie gives a history of the large family compound and courtyard. The largest addition was made some fifty years earlier, paid for with profits from the family's foreign trade in silk. She goes to the greenhouse, which has been used for storage since uncle failed to grow anything there. Old Aunt refers to uncle's western hobbies as "Ha Pi," a colorful expression meaning worthless, but literally "breathing out farts." It is here that Winnie and Peanut stash forbidden romance novels.

As they got ready for market that day, Peanut rehearsed what they would buy, beginning with a fortune. She wants to know about her future husband. New Aunt had given Peanut money the night before. She is supposed to share with Winnie, Little Gong and Little Gao, but Winnie is anxious that she will not. Peanut applies forbidden make-up and does so hideously. Winnie tries in vain to talk her out of it.

The fortuneteller tells Peanut she will marry a local boy. When Peanut pays her more money, she claims to have chased away the local boy and that Peanut will be the only wife of a boy from as close as Shanghai. She spots a mole above Winnie's eye and

says for a fee she can change this bad luck and keep this speck from blowing into her eye, but Peanut pulls her away.

At a play, they meet one of the actors, Wen Fu, when he asks Peanut for a donation. He follows her for the rest of the day, buying them all gifts. Only Winnie refuses, citing the impropriety. Peanut is swept off her feet, but she refuses to see him when he visits during the New Year's celebration. She cannot wear make-up at home and is worried he will think her ugly. Winnie becomes their intermediary.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter opens with a clue as to Pearl's resentment of her mother. Winnie believes that many of the heartaches she suffered might have been avoided had she had a mother to advise her. Perhaps for that reason, she has been a bit overbearing with Pearl. Winnie had cautioned Pearl not to love a man she found herself apologizing to or one who thought of himself first. She spoke from experience, but failed to explain that to Pearl.

Winnie's own father had not visited her in years, leaving her feeling unloved and lonely. She understands that New Aunt is demonstrating her love and concern for Peanut by teaching her the things a wife should know. She is helping Peanut prepare for her future. Later, when Winnie tries to do the same for Pearl, she misunderstands the attention as mere instructions in domesticity.

A mole on the face is considered bad luck because it can fall into the eye and keep one from seeing something. Winnie is unable to have the fortuneteller remove the speck because Peanut's fortunes have taken most of the money they were to share. The fortune teller claims to have chased away the local boy Peanut was to have married, something Peanut seems to forget when she meets local boy Wen Fu at the play in the market.

Only Winnie resists Wen Fu, citing lessons from the aunts that warn against temptation and pre-marital intimacy. "Take even one sweet, and lose your whole life to bitterness. Eat forbidden candy and your stomach pops out."

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Winnie helps Peanut and Wen Fu arrange meetings in the greenhouse to talk and kiss while the family sleeps after the noon meal. Winnie is worried and realizes she could be punished if they are found out. She tells Pearl that there was no reward for good behavior, that was expected, but bad behavior could be punished severely. Winnie refuses to continue as go-between, and Wen Fu finds a woman to deliver his letters and a marriage proposal.

Auntie Miao, the matchmaker he had chosen, knew Winnie. A member of the Lin family had spited Auntie Miao and when a match might have been made between a Lin boy and Winnie, she intervened. This time, however, she must have told Wen Fu's family about Winnie's rich father. Winnie noticed right away that when the Wen family came to tea, they were watching her even as Peanut served them. When Old Aunt and New Aunt returned the visit the following day, they came home with a marriage proposal for Winnie, not Peanut.

No one asked Winnie for an answer because the decision was not hers to make. In addition, she saw the marriage as a chance to make a better life. Winnie's father summoned her and her aunts to meet with him. Over tea in the house where she was born, Winnie listened as the arrangements were settled. She stayed in the house for the next week to shop for her dowry. San Ma, the senior wife, took Winnie shopping, choosing for Winnie better things than she chose for herself. Winnie began to believe her dreams for a better life were coming true. Her favorite piece of furniture is a vanity with a brocade bench, where she plans to sit and look just like her mother. Winnie tells Pearl it is like the one she bought her, the one she hated.

Although the dowry seemed rich and exhaustive, Winnie later learns that San Ma had bought five times as much for Sz Ma's daughters. In the end, none of it mattered. The Wen family took everything in her dowry away from her, dividing the silk quilts among Wen Fu's brothers and sisters, selling the furniture in their export business. Wen Fu's mother took the wedding gifts for her own rooms. Winnie saved only 10 pairs of silver chopsticks in the lining of her suitcase.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Birth order determines levels of responsibility in many cultures, and so it was that Winnie, as the eldest, could be punished for Peanut's behavior. It was also customary to threaten children into submission early in their lives. When Winnie's fear finally gets the best of her, she refuses to continue as an intermediary. Wen Fu is compelled to propose marriage to maintain a relationship with Peanut.

As tradition dictates, a matchmaker meets with both families to determine whether the match is a lucky one and to discuss a dowry. Because Winnie's father is very rich, Wen Fu's family sees an opportunity to improve its position and wealth, so she is chosen instead of Peanut. This is the way things were done and Winnie hoped the marriage would change her life for the better.

It seems to be so from the onset. She gets to see her father and stay in his house while shopping for her dowry. Only later does she learn that she has received much less than his other daughters have. She then believes her father had known all along that the Wen family character was not so good and maybe he was saying she was not so good either. The Wen family strips all the beautiful trappings of her new life from her.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Winnie says she was not always as negative thinking as Pearl and Helen say. Helen, she says, is the one who sees something good and thinks something bad. She believes life taught her to be more cautious than most.

Three days before Winnie's wedding, a jealous Peanut repeats gossip she has heard about the Wen family and other tales told by the men over drinks. She warns Winnie not to love Wen Fu too much, and then tells her a story about a newlywed couple who got stuck together during the act. The husband died when his wife, who loved him to much, squeezed the life out of him.

Winnie then recalls her wedding night. She screamed when her husband took off his clothes and his "Ji-ji" looked nothing like that of her little boy cousins. Winnie then makes up her own story about the newlywed couple, the woman who drained her husband's yang. She gives her a second chance at love and a happy ending.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Winnie denies that she is negative, saying that life simply taught her to be cautiously optimistic. She begins her story shortly before her wedding when Peanut, no doubt motivated by jealousy, tells Winnie stories to frighten her. Winnie rewrites one of those stories in her head to give it the happy ending she wishes for herself.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Winnie and Helen, then Hulan, 18, met for the first time in Hangchow. Both had married air force pilots and thought themselves lucky. Americans were training the pilots, and the language barrier caused many misunderstandings. Winnie says that is what gave the Japanese their opportunity to invade China.

Winnie and Wen Fu had only been married a month when they moved from his parents' house to the monastery at the training facility. Wen Fu's mother had instructed Winnie on the ways of a proper wife, telling her to burn her finger testing his soup but never cry out because such a sacrifice for a husband should not hurt. Wen Fu demanded sex every night. Before he had been gentle and coaxing, but now in their rooms at the training facility, he wanted her to say dirty words. When she refused, he put her out into the hall naked and locked the door. She gave in, and his treatment of her worsened. He began to compare her unfavorably to other women he knew. Winnie also learned that her husband used his dead brother's credentials to get into the Air Force.

Winnie and Hulan were two of only six women at the training facility because most of the pilots were too young to be married and the American advisors did not bring their wives or girlfriends. However, they did bring a lice-ridden local girl in, and afterwards Winnie and the other wives refused to use the bathhouse. They made their own in a tearoom and heated buckets of water in the kitchen.

Hulan was married to Long Jiaguo, a handsome, educated vice captain and Wen Fu's boss. Jiaguo kept Hulan informed, and she passed news on to Winnie. Hulan told her that if the pilots did not improve, they might all be sent to an Italian training camp in Loyang, a place where it flooded and there were dust storms, where the Buddhas' heads had been cut off – a bad luck place. Winnie did not know whether to believe Hulan, who was naïve and easily fooled. Winnie had begun to make excuses – an upset stomach or swollen feet -- not to go on outings with her.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Winnie is surprised to learn that her husband is a pilot. It had not occurred to her to ask what he did for a living. The task of teaching Winnie how to be a proper wife had fallen to Wen Fu's mother, whose lessons were simple and traditional by Chinese standards. Winnie should protect him, fear him and respect him. This was love. By Western standards, of course, these were traits one would look for in a servant, not a spouse. However, prior to the Cultural Revolution, a Chinese wife was little more than a servant or chattel. As such, Winnie submits to her husband even as he is sexually abusing her. When she learns he is using a false identity, she tells no one.

Hulan has obviously married well beyond her station in life, as she is quite rough around the edges. She is also worldly. Winnie is intrigued by Hulan and feels she must maintain a good relationship with her for her husband's sake.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Winnie did not know when the war started, saying they were kept in the dark about many things and even the newspaper could not be trusted. They shared what news that had at night over supper. Hulan and Jiaguo sat with Winnie and Wen Fu. Jiaguo was ten years older and more powerful than Wen Fu, so Winnie was surprised that he accepted Hulan's scolding – telling him what he should eat, that she had found the book he misplaced, complaining about a stain on his pants. Winnie envied Hulan because her husband seemed so lenient. After supper, the men would play cards. Winnie saw that her husband was popular with the others, although he occasionally scared them and laughed at them as he did her.

Winnie and Hulan often spent afternoons together, taking a picnic and their embroidery to a pavilion behind the monastery. There, they read in the newspaper a declaration from Chiang Kai-shek that China would not give anything to Japan. They ate, and Hulan told Winnie that judging by her appetite, she was pregnant. Winnie protested and recounted the story Old Aunt told her about menstruation. She said the bleeding began when a girl began to have impure thoughts, but after she married and became a good wife, it would stop.

Hulan told her the truth and that she had learned it last year from a girl who had fallen in love with one of the pilots in Loyang. When the girl went into labor, she asked Hulan to go with her to the pilot's house where she begged him to marry her. When he refused, she cursed him. He slapped her, and she fell. The baby began to come, blue with the cord wrapped around its neck. Mother and child died. The girl had been Hulan's sister. The pilot was Jiaguo. He married Hulan to ease his guilt. She married him to punish him for the tragedy, but he had turned out to be a good man.

Winnie told Wen Fu that night that she was pregnant and they could no longer have sex. He laughed at her and forced himself on her. When Winnie tells Hulan about Wen Fu's sexual appetite, Hulan is unsympathetic and tells her she should be grateful, that when her husband loses interest in her and goes elsewhere she would have a reason to be unhappy. A week later, the pilots leave for a battle over Shanghai.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Shifts in power were shaking the political landscape in China. In 1924, when Sun Yat-sen, leader of the Republic, died, the communists were massacred by Chiang Kai-Shek. It was the struggle for power between the remaining communists and Kuomintang factions that left the country vulnerable to invasion by the Japanese. It was probably one of these skirmishes, Winnie believes, that was responsible for the start of the war.

As they become closer, Hulan tells Winnie the truth about how she and Jiaguo came to marry. Fearing her sister's curse, he took Hulan as his wife. That is also why he appears to be lenient with her. He allows her to challenge and scold him because he feels he deserves it or worse.

The worldly Hulan discounts Winnie's superstition that she has finally become a good wife and that is why her periods have stopped. Hulan tells Winnie she is pregnant. Later when Winnie complains to Hulan about Wen Fu's sexual appetite, she gets no sympathy only a warning about how unhappy she will be when he goes elsewhere for sex.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

While the radio reports a victory, one of the wives whose husband has been killed says otherwise. The Japanese surprised the Chinese pilots causing them to miss the Japanese navy in the harbor and drop their bombs on their countrymen in Shanghai. Hulan's only response is joy that her husband has survived. Winnie thinks it selfish and admonishes her to be concerned about others, that something worse could be coming.

Hulan says she is cursing their future with her words. It is a severe reprimand, and it damages their friendship. Winnie retreats to her room and makes a dress so tight that she is stuck while trying it on. She takes the experience as a metaphor that she is stuck in her friendship with Hulan and stuck in her marriage.

Days later, the wives are told they will be reunited with their husbands in Yangchow. Their living quarters have been getting steadily worse since the start of the war, and these are the worst so far. Their rooms have mud walls and dirt floors, and they must share a kitchen, a cook and a manservant. Immediately, Hulan gets to work using an egg mixture to seal the walls and floors, and then helps Winnie to the same.

Winnie tells Pearl she tried to be a good wife and recounted the fancy meals she made and paid for with dowry money provided by her father. The dinners grew smaller each time as fewer pilots returned from each mission. One of those pilots, Gan, became a close friend who made Winnie feel less lonely. Gan tells Winnie the legend of The Nine Bad Fates: that eight have happened to him and a ghost has predicted the ninth will occur within four months. Gan dies in a plane crash in Nanking. Winnie believes his ill-fated love for her was the ninth bad fate. She grieves that she did not take the chance to love Gan in return. Meanwhile, her husband flies away from battle, remains unscathed and is facing a possible court-martial.

Chapter 11 Analysis

In 1932, as Chiang Kai-Shek declares himself commander of the Chinese armed forces, the Japanese bombard the city of Shanghai, aided by the young, inexperienced Chinese pilots who drop their bombs on the city instead of the harbor. This was not the recorded account, but a rumor that proved to be true.

When Winnie warns Hulan that something worse could be coming, Hulan accuses her of

"daomei," using bad-luck words to poison the future. Winnie is wounded by the accusation, fearful that she will be blamed for the bad things that are sure to happen in the future. She tells Pearl this is when Hulan "broke harmony" with her, when their friendship acquired four splits and five cracks. They begin to repair their friendship after

they are transferred to the next training facility. Helen seals her mud walls and floor, and then does the same for Winnie – fixing one thing so she can fix another as Winnie puts it.

As evidence of her attempts to be a dutiful wife, Winnie tells Pearl about the fancy meals she makes for her husband and the other pilots. As the pilots are killed off, the dinners become more intimate and Winnie gets to know better those who remain. She is learning that not all men are like Wen Fu and she begins to care about them, particularly a pilot named Gan. Gan who tells Winnie the legend of The Nine Bad Fates, and after he is killed, she believes in the legend. She believes he has fallen in love with her and that this, his ninth bad fate, is what causes him to die.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The pilots and their wives move into a big house in Nanking near the Sorrowfree Lake. Wen Fu tells Winnie not to settle in; they will be leaving soon. Winnie withdraws four hundred yuan by telegram from the bank in Shanghai and sends instructions to Wen Fu's sister about how to get the money to her. She urges her to be quick as they will soon be "Taonan," in great danger. The sister sends the money to Wen Fu instead. He uses it to buy a dead pilot's car, which he wrecks.

Winnie and Hulan walk into town where Winnie chooses this time to send Peanut a telegram about how to get her money to her. While they shop in the market, Japanese planes fly over. Panic breaks out and they are almost crushed in the mob. The planes finally drop leaflets promising good treatment if there is no resistance. They leave Nanking that day, and Winnie says, in retrospect, they were not really Taonan, but close to it.

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter is another glimpse into the history of the war in China. The pilots and their planes are retreating to more and more remote locations as the Japanese are gaining ground. In Nanking, Wen Fu tells Winnie to be prepared to move quickly. She takes this bit of unusual news from her husband quite seriously and asks her sister-in-law to send her money quickly, telling her they will soon be in great danger. Wen Fu receives the money instead. When he uses it to buy a dead pilot's car, which he later crashes in a graveyard, Winnie does not attribute this to her husband's recklessness, but as the bad luck attached to the dead man's car.

Winnie does not know how right she is when she uses the word "Taonan" to describe their imminent danger. She mentions the leaflets dropped by Japanese planes promising good treatment if there were no resistance. They leave Nanking just ahead of the invasion, now known as the "Rape of Nanking" during which thousands were raped and killed by the Japanese.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

They have an hour to pack and can only bring one suitcase each. They are headed to Kunming; a place so remote that Winnie believes even the Japanese could not be interested in. On the trip, they meet soldiers on their way to Chungking to set up a new capital. The soldiers tell them about the Rape of Nanking. Winnie realizes all this was going on while she was enjoying the scenery and local delicacies. She never again eats delicious white eel.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The pilots and their wives are evacuated to Kunming narrowly escaping the Japanese invasion. Although they have left almost everything they owned behind, they find themselves enjoying the breathtaking scenery, particularly the high mountain passes surrounded by clouds, and the food. However, just as anyone might remember where he or she is when a catastrophic event occurs, Winnie remembers what she was eating when the brutal rapes and murders were occurring in Nanking, and the delicacy is forever tied to the event and ruined for her.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Winnie says in Kunming, her luck changed from bad to worse. They move into small rooms in a Yang Fang or foreign-style house between the city's north and east gates. After one of the tenants, the inspector, contracts malaria and dies, Winnie pays extra from her dowry for the larger rooms and for servants no longer provided by the Air Force.

Winnie is nine months pregnant when she drops her scissors and her child is born dead. She names the girl Mochou, Sorrowfree, after the lake in Nanking. Winnie has the scissors thrown in a lake and waits one hundred days before shopping for a new pair. In the market as she is selecting a new pair, she turns over a table of forty pairs of scissors.

Days later, Jiaguo tells her he may have to fire Wen Fu or put him in jail. He has bribed a driver for use of a Jeep he has wrecked. A girl riding with him has been killed. It is the first time Winnie is confronted by other women her husband is seeing. Hulan convinces her husband not to punish Wen Fu because by doing so he punishes the wife. Winnie understands this is a big debt not paid by the beautiful cloth she gives Hulan. However, she is dismayed that Hulan later forgets the gift, assuming she bought the material for herself.

Wen Fu is blinded in one eye because of the accident. He is angry and unreasonable, mistreating his caregivers so much that Winnie ends up caring for him by herself. She makes dinner for his visitors one night and he comes downstairs to humiliate her. When no one stops him, Winnie feels her shame is complete.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Scissors and knives are instruments used to slice things away. In the Chinese culture, neither may be used on New Year's Day for fear that a family's luck with be cut off. A dropped pair of scissors signals a death. Thus, Winnie believes dropping her scissors killed her unborn child, and dropping forty pairs in the market caused her husband to be blinded, to kill someone and become crueler than ever. It is particularly poignant that she names her baby Mochou, which means Sorrowfree, because she will not live to experience any sorrow.

Hulan's intervention saves Wen Fu's job, and she does it so that Winnie will not be punished. This is the beginning of the debt that Hulan holds over Winnie's head. She even manages to forget Winnie's gift of cloth as payment. Even Hulan fails to defend Winnie when Wen Fu loses his temper and shames her in front of guests, but Winnie realizes something valuable, that they are also scared of Wen Fu, and that fear is what feeds his power.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Winnie recalls a sermon Jimmie gave, "Jesus Forgives, Can You?" She tells Pearl it gave her peace to let go of her anger, but that she could not forgive Wen Fu. She muses that Jesus found it easy to forgive because he had it easier than she did. He was the son of God and everyone worshipped him. No one worshipped Winnie for living with Wen Fu. She was like the wife of the Kitchen God, who was forgotten despite her good works in the face of adversity.

In 1939, Winnie gives birth to a daughter. Wen Fu sees the baby a day later and handles her roughly, making her cry. When Winnie calms the baby, Wen Fu acts as if the baby has insulted him, putting himself, even before his newborn daughter. To assert himself, he orders the nurse to bring him lunch. When she refuses saying the food is for patients only, he tries to command her respect by pointing to his ruined eye and declaring himself a war hero. When that fails to move her, he destroys the hospital kitchen. Winnie apologizes and pays for the damages.

Winnie names her daughter Yiku, "pleasure over bitterness." Wen Fu does not like the baby, so Winnie tries to keep her quiet and out of his way.

When Yiku is six months old, the fourteen-year-old servant girl asks to leave, saying she is not a good enough worker. Winnie learns her husband has been raping the girl. She decides to keep the peace by sending the girl away with three months' wages. She later hears that the girl has died trying to abort a baby. She confronts Wen Fu, who angrily denies her accusations. Yiku begins to cry and Winnie comforts her as she tells Wen Fu she will not have sex with him anymore. She taunts him, saying the only one he can scare is a baby.

He begins slapping Yiku repeatedly until she curls up in a ball making small mewing sounds. She was never the same. She cowered when Wen Fu came into the room, never looked at people's faces, banged her head and pulled her hair out.

The double seventh, a lucky day, became one of regrets. Yiku was seventeen months old and Winnie was seven months pregnant. A railway official, invited to lunch, told them they could tell who was winning the war by the value of their currency. Wen Fu offers theories that the official laughs off. Winnie joins in the laughter, making him angry. Yiku begins rocking and mewing, and the following day becomes very ill. Winnie tries to get the doctor to admit her to the hospital, but Wen Fu will not let him leave a Mah Jong game and says he does not care if she died. When she dies, Wen Fu claims Winnie did not even tell him the child was sick. Winnie asks Pearl if she had seen this, could she have forgiven Wen Fu?

Chapter 15 Analysis

Winnie realizes that she is easy to anger and finds it hard to forgive. She tells Pearl there was so much to be angry about, so much to forgive. She muses that it would have been easier to forgive had she received any recognition at all for her forbearance. However, just as good behavior was expected when she was a girl, her loyalty to her husband no matter his brutality, was likewise expected. Winnie likens herself to the role of the Kitchen God's wife. She was the ever-good one, but he was the one elevated to the post of a deity.

She then goes on to describe Wen Fu's mistreatment of others. When the servant girl claims she is unworthy, Winnie knows something is wrong because it is the Chinese way to say you are unworthy when you mean you are worth more. She learns he has raped the girl repeatedly, but decides to keep the peace by paying her well and sending her on her way. When she learns the girl has died trying to abort Wen Fu's child, she cannot keep silent and provokes a fight with Wen Fu, who beats Yiku obviously causing brain damage.

Winnie had named the baby Yiku in hopes that she would have a life of "comfort winning over hardship." To that end, Winnie encouraged her to be good, to be quiet, later realizing she is teaching her to be afraid, just as she was taught.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Winnie wishes she were not having another baby with Wen Fu. She decides to name the child, girl or boy, Danru, "nonchalance," so the baby will not be attached to anything in this life. After five days in the hospital with her son, Winnie goes home to fine a girl named Min, dressed in one of her nightgowns, sleeping in her bed. Hulan's Auntie Du Ching has also joined the household.

Winnie decides Min should stay as her husband's concubine, freeing her from his desires. Winnie befriends Min, who tells her about the Great World, a French Amusement Arcade, where she worked as a scantily clad magician's assistant. She also sang at Sincere, a department store on Nanking Road. Min teaches Winnie all the popular dances, and Winnie teaches Min how to write her name, to sew, to speak properly. Winnie has pretended to the others that Min is a relative, but Auntie Du tells her they know who she really is and that she is pregnant. Still, Winnie welcomes the news, hoping that it will be her way out of the marriage. She offers Wen Fu a divorce, but he throws Min out instead.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Winnie feels trapped in her marriage by her pregnancy and she is afraid to bring another child into harm's way. No one is shocked by Wen Fu's taking a concubine; it was a common practice in China at the time. More surprising is the way Winnie takes to Min. She sees her as a way out of her misery, as someone to divert Wen Fu's unwanted sexual advances. However, she also nurtures the girl, perhaps in the way she wishes she had been nurtured. She teaches her things she will need to know if she makes her own way in the world and she instills in her the confidence to go after her dream of becoming a professional singer.

When Winnie learns from Auntie Du that Min is pregnant, she hopes her husband will divorce her. However, Wen Fu refuses to do so, perhaps out of spite or a desire to maintain the connection to her rich father. It is Min, who wins her freedom instead.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Wen Fu continues to see other women after Min is gone. Winnie becomes increasingly defiant, and predictably, their relationship worsens. To add to the pressure they are under, the war is going badly. The Chinese do not know whom to trust. British and American allies seem to be making decisions that benefit the Japanese and Chinese leaders are acquiescing which causes much humiliation. Jiaguo and Wen Fu, who has a new job in radio communications, leave for Chungking.

While in the market, sirens sound warning people to leave the city through the nearest gate. When the bombing stops, Winnie and Hulan feel lucky to be unscathed and celebrate with a big supper. The planes come every few days to bomb Kunming in the morning and Chungking in the afternoon.

One morning, Winnie and Hulan leave Danru with Auntie Du and go to market. Hulan, who is illiterate despite Jiaguo's tutelage, pretends her glasses are not strong enough to read a letter from her husband. Winnie learns that Jiaguo regrets never having consummated their marriage. The sirens go off and bombs fall. Winnie and Hulan are separated as people and buildings are blown to bits. Winnie runs home to find Hulan, but Auntie Du and Danru are missing. They run back to the city and search for hours, during which Winnie promises God many things if she finds her son alive.

Chapter 17 Analysis

As Winnie begins to stand up for herself, Wen Fu becomes increasingly violent. Her son, Danru, is the one bright spot in the tense household, the one person Winnie truly loves. The war is also taking its toll as the Americans, the British and even Chinese leaders make concessions that benefit the Japanese and cause the Chinese much "loss of face," a serious offense in the Chinese culture. This potential "loss of face" keeps Hulan from confessing that she cannot read.

When the Japanese bomb Kunming, Winnie fears that her son has been killed, and promises that if he is found alive she will serve God in a number of ways including becoming a better wife to Wen Fu.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

In a major development in 1937, the communists and Kuomintang unite to repel the Japanese. To assist them, the Americans form the Flying Tigers. Shortly after the Flying Tigers chase the Japanese away from Kunming in 1941, the Americans invite the Chinese to a dance party. There, Winnie spots a tall Chinese man, American-born Jimmie Louie, who works for the United States Information Service. He is handsome and charming, introducing himself and shaking hands in the western fashion.

Jimmie is entertaining the Chinese by giving them American names that will be easier for their new American friends to pronounce. Thus, Hulan became Helen and Wieli became Winnie, a lively, lucky sounding name from the word "win." Jiaguo became "Jack" and Wen Fu "Victor." However, Wen Fu is not satisfied and asks for a name more special than his wife's, so Jimmie names him "Judas." Only Winnie, educated by nuns, understands what Jimmie has done. Winnie decides to take back one promise she made during the bombing – to be a better wife to Wen Fu. When Jimmie asks her to dance with him, she accepts.

Wen Fu rages at her when they get home, putting a gun to her head and making her sign a divorce paper before raping her. The next day, Winnie packs and leaves with Danru despite pleadings from Helen and Auntie Du to stay, that her situation is not that bad or unusual. Helen then helps Winnie find a room and promises to get her transportation out of town. Instead, Helen brings Wen Fu, who abuses Winnie for months during which time she suffers three miscarriages.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Winnie hopes God will not be angry with her, but she cannot keep her promise to be a better wife to Wen Fu as she despises him. She meets her future husband at an American dance party, and is amused when he names her husband Judas, a one-of-a-kind name that suits such an evil man. The rapport between the two of them begins then and gives her enough confidence to dance with him; something she knew would provoke Wen Fu.

Predictably, Wen Fu is angered by the dance. He brutalizes Winnie and makes her sign a divorce paper. Rather than be defeated, Winnie takes the divorce paper, Danru and leaves. Helen, who believes that divorce is a greater shame than the brutal marriage Winnie lives in, betrays her to Wen Fu. Winnie loses three more children to miscarriages, children who will not be a part of the fearful violence; children saved from a brutal fate, children she cannot mourn.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

For the rest of the war, Winnie lives without hope or resistance, not despairing or accepting, what she calls being weak and strong. It is summer 1945 when Winnie gets another chance to leave. A soldier bursts into their home with the news that the war is over. They pack and leave Kunming the next day. In Wuchang, Hulan, Jiaguo and Auntie Du will head to Harbin while Winnie, Wen Fu and Danru will go to Nanking then Shanghai. Winnie and Hulan stay up late, exchange presents and addresses.

Winnie hopes to enlist her father's help in leaving her husband. When she arrives at Jiang Sao-yen's, the house is strangely empty and her father seems frightened of Wen Fu in his uniform. The following day, she learns from San Ma that her father sought to keep his factories open by cooperating with the Japanese. During an argument about what he had done, he suffered a stroke. When the war ended, the Chinese (Kuomintang) shut down the factories and labeled him a traitor. When Wen Fu hears the story, he offers his protection. Ever the opportunist, he invites his family to move in, hires additional servants and begins selling off the family's valuables to support his gambling habit.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Winnie, like any abused person, gives up for a while. She is strong in her resolve to find a way out, but weak in her efforts at this point.

The Japanese are defeated by 1944 and put an end to their quest to take China. Now, Winnie sees another chance to leave Wen Fu. When they return to her father's house, she will ask for his help. However, she finds her father in a crisis after his cooperation with the Japanese. After the Chinese regained control of Shanghai, they punished Jiang Sao-yen as a traitor by taking away his factories. He has no money and is in danger of being arrested and tried as a traitor. In a strange turn of events, Wen Fu, being a member of the Kuomintang, can offer him protection. In return, however, he depletes his father-in-law's wealth by selling off his possessions to support himself and his extended family.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

Winnie Plans to go to her aunts for help in leaving her husband, but she and Danru get sick. By the time she gets to Tsungming Island, it is past the New Year 1946. Winnie finds the aunts in worse circumstances than her father. The house is in disrepair and Little Gong and Little Gao have become laborers in a shipyard. Winnie decides she cannot ask them for help. She learns that Peanut has left her marriage and joined the Communists. Her aunts denounce Peanut, but each slips Winnie her address and gifts for her.

A week later in Shanghai, Winnie goes to see Peanut. The address takes her to a poor part of town where students, writers, artists and prostitutes live. A man sells magazines like the ones Winnie and Peanut used to read as girls. Winnie recalls that the romances always had unhappy endings and a moral lesson such as "Fall in love, fall into disgrace." However, Winnie realizes they were only stories and wonders if, in real life, she, her mother and Peanut might find happy endings.

At that moment, Jimmie Louie taps her on her shoulder. It was fate. Over tea, Winnie tells him about her family's circumstances. Jimmie is sympathetic. He shows her a picture of Mrs. Liang's four daughters, any of whom he may have for a wife, then tells Winnie he chooses her. They agree to meet the following day. She is very late, but he has waited. He takes her hands and they know they will be together.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Winnie has nothing of her own and needs help to leave Wen Fu. She plans to ask her aunts, but finds them in poverty. They also denounce Peanut for leaving her husband so Winnie cannot tell them that she is even thinking about doing the same. Her aunts still love Peanut and are worried about her, so they secretly slip Winnie her address and some things to take her, giving Winnie the opportunity to find out how Peanut managed to escape her marriage.

On her way to find Peanut, Winnie is reminded of the romances the two of them used to read in the magazines. Now, as an adult, she realizes all of the stories about relationships for love's sake (a Western concept) had unhappy endings and moral lessons that cautioned readers not to expect too much (a Chinese concept). She wonders if reality is different and if those once disappointed by loveless marriages might find love. Love finds Winnie at that moment in the person of Jimmie Louie. The timing can only mean one thing to her, that it is fate that they are together.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

On the walk to Peanut's, Winnie tells Jimmie how she has suffered in her marriage. Jimmie tells her he has loved her since they met and he thinks she is strong. She tells him she will get a divorce.

Winnie finds Peanut working on posters with an artist. Everything about her is different, from the way she cares for herself to the clothes she wears and the way she behaves. Peanut opens the gifts Winnie has brought rather than waiting until she is alone. Old Aunt has sent a mirror. Winnie has given her stockings, which she can see Peanut no longer wears. Peanut says she will sell them on the black market because she can use the cash. She has nothing for Winnie and tells her that she cannot be bothered with the old customs anyway.

Peanut tells Winnie that she could not stay in her marriage because her husband turned out to be a hermaphrodite, possibly meaning homosexual. She caught him in bed with a man. His family kept this a secret by buying five babies for his first wife. Peanut, his second, was ordered into seclusion for five months then presented with a baby boy.

Peanut says she visited their old boarding school and found a memorial to their friend Little Yu. Sister Momo said she had died in an accident a year after her marriage. Peanut found Little Yu's mother who told her that her daughter was so unhappy in her marriage that she committed suicide. Winnie admits to Peanut that she has thought of doing the same. Peanut tells her Little Yu's mother felt responsible for not helping her daughter so she helped Peanut and many others. The boarding house is a hiding place for women who have run away from their husbands. Winnie decides to join them.

Chapter 21 Analysis

Winnie finds courage in Jimmie's professed love for her and meets with him, promising she will do what is necessary to be with him.

Winnie finds Peanut and is shocked to see the change in her. Tradition calls for a person who receives a gift to open it in private, but Peanut opens her presents in front of Winnie. The gifts are entirely inappropriate for the kind of woman Peanut has become. She no longer cares about hair, makeup and fancy clothes. Winnie's stockings will be converted to the cash she obviously needs. The mirror (to remind her of beauty and vanity) is not something she will use.

Peanut has left her husband because she could not live the lie his family perpetuated while covering for his homosexuality. When the family pretended she has given birth to a baby they bought for her, Peanut left. Peanut then tells Winnie that Little Yu, a former classmate of theirs, left her marriage by committing suicide, which resonates with

Winnie. Little Yu's mother, who had encouraged her daughter to stay in her marriage, now made it her life's work to help other women escape unhappy marriages. Winnie believes this is the help she has been looking for.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

Winnie finds Jimmie and tells him she is leaving her marriage. They plan her escape. Then Winnie begins to have second thoughts. She worries that Wen Fu will have her father killed in retaliation. She goes to her father and tells him she must leave her husband. He pulls three gold ingots from a scroll, which she tells him she will take when she leaves. Winnie then devises a story that she is going to see Old Aunt, who is ill. She takes the gold and leaves.

Chapter 22 Analysis

Winnie and Jimmie believe they will be together for the rest of their lives, but Winnie is having second thoughts about leaving Wen Fu out of loyalty and concern for her father. She decides to tell her father about her plans as a warning to him. He surprises her by offering her gold that will help her pay her way. She wonders if he does so out of love for her or in hopes Wen Fu will leave his house when she is gone.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

Winnie shows Pearl a scrapbook of pictures Jimmie took of her, even one of her in a nightgown, her hair mussed. He sang, "You Are My Sunshine," to her every morning. She tells Pearl that sex with her father was entirely different from sex with Wen Fu. It was joyful. She shows Pearl a picture taken three months after she and Danru moved in with Jimmie, how happy they all were. There is a picture of her smiling, but worried. The lawyer who had taken two gold ingots had advertised her divorce but Wen Fu had his office ransacked and the papers torn up.

Winnie decides Danru is not safe, so she sends him to stay with Auntie Du until the divorce is final. He dies in an epidemic along with Jiaguo. The next picture shows Winnie at 29, wearing the sweater Jimmie has given her for her birthday. She is sad. There are no more pictures after that one, Winnie tells Pearl, because she was arrested and thrown in jail. She was taken to court and charged with stealing her husband's son and letting him die, stealing valuables from her husband's family and deserting him to run off with an American.

Winnie disputes the charges. Wen Fu denies they had divorce papers. Auntie Du says she and Helen were witnesses, but because they cannot produce the paper that Wen Fu had destroyed, the judge sentences Winnie to two years. Wen Fu offers to drop the charges and take Winnie home. In an act of pure defiance, she chooses jail.

The scandal costs Jimmie his job and he returns to America, but sends money so Auntie Du can stay in Shanghai and care of Winnie. She passes the time in jail teaching others how to read and write. She is saddened to find read that Min, who became a nightclub singer, has committed suicide. She is also saddened to learn that her father has died. Two of his wives bring her the news and tell her that Wen Fu is tearing down the house looking for gold that Jiang told him he had hidden in the walls.

Winnie shows Pearl the telegram she sent Jimmie asking if she could join him in America and be his wife. His response is not with it and is part of the story Winnie never wanted to tell.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Winnie moves in with Jimmie, a shocking break with tradition, while she seeks a divorce from Wen Fu. She is happy for the first time in her life, but still fearful of Wen Fu. To keep Danru safe, she sends him to stay with Auntie Du. When he dies in an epidemic, Auntie Du brings the news to her and does not leave her, even after Wen Fu has her thrown in jail. It is the beginning of their special bond.

Winnie is charged with stealing her husband's son because in accordance with Chinese custom, everything in a man's household belongs to him, including children. In an act of sheer defiance, Winnie chooses jail over Wen Fu's offer to drop the charges and take her home. It is her proudest moment, despite the dire consequences.

Auntie Du stays to care for Winnie while she is in jail, a care she will return when Auntie Du grows old. While in jail, Winnie continues to nurture and care for others. She is saddened and relieved by her father's death, realizing that Wen Fu can no longer hurt him. She is also amused to learn that her father has played a terrible trick on Wen Fu, telling him about hidden gold in the walls of the opulent home he might have inherited. Instead, Wen Fu is tearing it down with his own hands.

Winnie eases into the final part of her confessional to Pearl by showing her the telegram she sent Jimmie as she begins to tell her why his response is not there.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Helen is pregnant and comes to visit Winnie who has been in jail for more than a year. She is remarried to Kuang An, later known as Henry Kwong. She says he has connections and can get Winnie released. She is let out of jail, but later learns it was Auntie Du who threatened the authorities and got her out. Winnie sends Jimmie a telegram, sells jewelry and cashes the remaining gold ingot, then applies for a visa and buys three airline tickets for different departure dates. She does a last foolish thing. She entices Wen Fu to the telegraph office and gets him to sign a divorce paper.

Wen Fu breaks into her apartment and rapes her. He puts her visa and airline tickets into his pants. Winnie picks up his gun and threatens to kill him. Helen stops her. Winnie then orders Wen Fu to give his pants to Helen. She removes the visa and tickets, and then tosses the pants out of the window. Wen Fu follows his pants.

Winnie is on a plane the next day. Five days later, the Communists take over and no one else can leave. Winnie is reunited with Jimmie and nine months later, she gives birth to Pearl.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Helen promises Winnie that her new husband has connections and can get her out of prison. Winnie is released, and then learns that Auntie Du has frightened authorities into letting her go. She never tells Helen. Had Winnie not been let out of prison to join Jimmie in America, Pearl would have been born much too early to pass as Jimmie's daughter. Jimmie, perhaps would have rejected her or Pearl. Wen Fu could have claimed the child. These disasters were all avoided, thanks to Auntie Du and are part of the bond between the two.

While she prepares to leave and join Jimmie in America, Winnie cannot let go of the idea that Wen Fu has somehow cheated her out of the divorce she sought. She tricks him into signing a divorce paper and he loses face in front of a room full of people.

Wen Fu retaliates against Winnie for humiliating him. He rapes her at gunpoint and attempts to take her tickets and visa. With Helen's help, Winnie gets them back and gets out of China in the last few days before the Communists take over, and travel in and out of China is shut down.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

Pearl realizes Wen Fu is her father. Winnie says only that he is gone and cannot hurt them. She says she has kept her past a secret because she did not want Pearl to think less of her than she already did.

Winnie says Pearl looks like her other children and at times, she lost her temper like Wen Fu. Winnie says she blamed the bad parts of Pearl's character on Wen Fu. Pearl says there is more they can blame on such a bad man and tells her mother about her illness. Winnie's reaction is even worse than Pearl expected, but Winnie is also determined to find help for her.

Going to Bao-Bao and Mimi's wedding reception, Winnie fusses that Pearl's dress is too thin, tells Phil to give her his jacket and that he should buy her a warm coat. Helen mentions to Pearl that she and Winnie may go to China to buy medicine for her and that Pearl must go, too. She confesses that the brain tumor was a lie.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Winnie has been afraid not only of Wen Fu, but of also of what Pearl would think of her for being involved with such a bad man. Pearl realizes that she was not only precious to her father, but to her mother as well. She is the first of Winnie's children to survive childhood. Winnie's fears about Wen Fu's influence on Pearl's character led her to be a bit overbearing at times. Pearl takes this opportunity to confess her illness to her mother and suggest that just as her mother had attributed the bad parts of her character on Wen Fu, they could blame him for her illness.

At Bao-Bao's wedding reception, Winnie "mothers" Pearl, and Pearl lets her. Helen lets Pearl know that she and her mother have discussed taking her to China for medicines to cure her illness. Helen has a final confession of her own; her fatal illness was nothing more than a hoax to bring mother and daughter together.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Helen tells Winnie she always knew that Wen Fu was Pearl's father. She says she tried to convince Winnie that he had not been born bad so she would not believe Pearl might have been born bad, too.

Helen and Winnie shop for a god for Pearl's altar in the Sam Food Trading Company (Shop of the Gods). Winnie tells Mrs. Hong that she is looking for a goddess nobody knows, one that might not even exist. Mrs. Hong remembers a statue missing a name. Winnie buys this one and paints on a name.

When Pearl visits, Winnie gives her Chinese herbs and the statue she describes this way. She has very black hair and has had many hardships in her life, but now, no worries. She is ready to listen. Winnie urges Pearl, who is crying, to tell the statue everything. Her name is Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness. Together, they light incense to carry their wishes to heaven.

Chapter 26 Analysis

Helen lets Winnie know that she always tried to ease her fears about what traits Pearl might have inherited from her father. She goes with her to help choose a new god for Pearl's altar. Winnie's description of the goddess she gives her daughter is her own. She has confessed her past and not been judged harshly for it. Pearl has a greater understanding of her mother and the strength it has taken to overcome the hardships she has suffered and to make a life for them both. Winnie, like the goddess, has set aside her fears. She is now ready to listen to her daughter.

Characters

Cleo Brandt

Cleo is Pearl and Phil's three-year-old daughter. She calls her Chinese grandma "Ha-bu."

Pearl Brandt

Pearl is Winnie's forty-year-old daughter. She lives fifty miles away from Winnie with her husband, Phil, and their two daughters. She does not feel the same impulse to be with her family for gatherings as her mother does, but she feels a sense of duty to be present.

Pearl works as a linguist and speech therapist for mentally challenged children. She has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis but has not told her mother. She has, however, told Helen, who claims to be dying and thus insists that Pearl tell her secret to her mother.

Although Pearl has always believed that Jimmy was her father, she learns from her mother's story that her father is probably Wen Fu.

Phil Brandt

Phil is Pearl's husband. Phil is a forty-threeyear- old Caucasian man who has difficulty understanding the Chinese customs and expectations of his mother-in-law. Still, he has come to have affection for the quirky woman, even though she often exasperates him. He is a pathologist and feels powerless to do anything to help his wife with her multiple sclerosis.

Tessa Brandt

Tessa is Pearl and Phil's eight-year-old daughter. Pearl was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis a year after Tessa's birth. She, too, calls her Chinese grandma "Ha-bu."

Mary Kwong Cheu

Hulan and Henry's daughter, Mary is responsible for introducing Pearl and Phil. Although she thinks of herself as one of Pearl's best friends, Pearl now only tolerates her. They have known each other for a very long time, and Mary's husband went to medical school with Phil. For this reason, Mary and her husband know about Pearl's illness.

Auntie Du Ching

Hulan's aunt, Auntie Du, is outspoken but very gentle. In a bold act, she saves her money and escapes the Japanese in order to meet up with Hulan in Kunming. It is she who arranges for Winnie's release from prison, although she allows Hulan's new husband to believe he managed it. When Auntie Du comes to America, Winnie takes care of her until her death. When she dies, she leaves Pearl her Kitchen God altar.

Danru

Danru is Winnie's third child and only son. His name means "nonchalance." Winnie swears that she will not allow him to become like his father. As Winnie plans her escape, she sends Danru to stay with Helen so that Wen Fu cannot get to him. While away, the child dies in an epidemic.

Wen Fu

Wen Fu is Winnie's abusive and domineering first husband. While planning to marry Peanut, he discovers that Winnie's family is wealthier and turns his attention to her. As a husband, he is verbally and physically abusive and enjoys frightening and humiliating Winnie. He is a coward, a womanizer, and a schemer.

When the war effort is underway, Wen Fu enlists in the air force and joins the group led by American pilot Claire Chennault. Winnie later discovers that Wen Fu was only accepted because he used his deceased brother's name and credentials. He becomes extremely violent after an auto accident claims one of his eyes, and each time Winnie tries to get a divorce he flies into a rage. Only when Winnie hears the news that he is dead does she feel completely free.

Gan

One of the pilots in Wen Fu's squadron, Gan is kind to Winnie and compliments her often. He is a gentleman who gives Winnie her first experience of feeling valued by a man.

Jiang Huazheng

Known affectionately as "Peanut," Jiang is Winnie's cousin and becomes a sister figure as the girls grow into adolescence. She thinks of herself as worldly and rebellious, wearing makeup and kissing Wen Fu when he visits her. Hoping for a wealthy husband who lives far away, she pays a fortune-teller to drive away any local suitors. Ironically, her marriage turns out so badly that she joins the communists, runs away from her husband, and later provides a place for other runaway wives to stay.

Long Jiaguo

Long Jiaguo is Hulan's first husband. He is a pilot in the same group as Wen Fu, although Long Jiaguo is Wen Fu's superior. He is even-tempered, reasonable, and dominated by his wife.

Henry Kwong

Henry is Hulan's second husband.

Hulan Kwong

Hulan (who is called Helen in America) is Winnie's oldest and dearest friend. In fact, they call each other sisters. Until Pearl hears Winnie's story, she believes that Hulan is her aunt.

Hulan co-owns the flower shop in Chinatown with Winnie. She is brash and uneducated, and her first marriage is unconventional in that she is usually the one in control. Her friendship with Winnie is unbreakable, although they often argue.

Roger Kwong

Roger is Hulan and Henry's son. He is called "Bao-bao." Already divorced twice and having recently broken an engagement, he is newly engaged at the beginning of the novel. It is his engagement banquet that brings Pearl to San Francisco.

Jimmy Louie

Winnie's great love, Jimmy is a Chinese- American man who acts as a translator for the military. He and Winnie meet at a military dance, and when they meet again by chance, they begin to make plans together. He is a kind man who becomes a Baptist minister in the United States. When Winnie is released from prison, he asks her to join him in America and be his wife.

Jimmy dies of stomach cancer when Pearl is fourteen years old. His death leaves an emotional scar on both Winnie and Pearl. Winnie theorizes that his death was the result of being a minister and swallowing everyone else's problems for so many years. It is not until Auntie Du's funeral that Pearl is able to tap her unexpressed grief and finally cry for the loss of the wonderful man she knew as her father.

Samuel Louie

Winnie's son is a few years younger than Pearl. He lives in New Jersey.

Winnie Louie

Winnie, known as Jiang Weili in China, is Pearl's mother. The majority of the novel comprises the incredible story of her arduous childhood and young womanhood in China, before she escaped her abusive husband and came to America. She was born into a wealthy family to her father's second wife, who doted on Winnie until her mysterious disappearance when Winnie was only six. Winnie marries a man she hardly knows and endures many trials and much suffering, including the loss of three children.

When Winnie flees to the United States, she marries Jimmy Louie, a kind Chinese-American man she met in China. She is a superstitious woman who adheres to many of the traditional Chinese beliefs. As a parent, she is demanding, warning her daughter of the dangers of blue eye shadow and certain boys. Her experiences in China have taken her from naivete and dependence to wisdom and self-confidence. When she finally shares her story with her daughter, they are able to relate to each other in a meaningful way. Her character represents the triumph of the human spirit, the commitment to survival, and the ability to endure tremendous hardship and create a new life for oneself. Having always identified with the Kitchen God's wife, Winnie "corrects" the myth at the end of the novel by replacing the Kitchen God (who had been an abusive and cruel mortal) with a female deity, whom she names "Sorrowfree."

San Ma

San Ma is Winnie's father's third wife. She takes Winnie shopping for her dowry and takes care of her husband when his health fails.

Min

Min is a concubine whom Wen Fu brings home for his pleasure while Winnie gives birth to Danru. She is illiterate and a performer. Winnie befriends her.

Mochou

Mochou is Winnie's first child, a stillborn girl. Her name means "Sorrowfree," the name Winnie later gives her new deity.

Peanut

See Jiang Huazheng

Jiang Sao-yen

Jiang Sao-yen is Winnie's father, a successful businessman who made his fortune in textiles. He has several wives and many children. He approves Winnie's marriage to Wen Fu, even though he apparently knows the family is not honorable. Late in life, he suffers a stroke and is unable to speak. His weakened health is the only thing that saves him from being executed by the Communists. When his daughter returns with Wen Fu, he understands that she is trying to escape and nods to show her where he has gold hidden. Winnie learns that he has died while she is in prison.

Uncle

This is Winnie's uncle, the younger brother of Jiang Sao-yen. Because of his lack of success, his older brother gives him a textile factory to manage. When Winnie's mother disappears, Winnie is sent to live with Uncle and his family.

Winnie's Mother

Her name is never given in the novel, but she is the second wife of Jiang Sao-yen. When she marries him, she occupies the second-wife position to replace the previous second wife, who committed suicide. She is a vain woman who takes her little daughter on a fun-filled day in town the day before she mysteriously disappears.

Yiku

Winnie's second daughter, Yiku's name means "sorrow over bitterness," and she dies in infancy when Wen Fu refuses to release the doctor from a game of mah jong to check on her.

Themes

Duty

A central element in Eastern culture is duty, and Winnie exhibits this sense of responsibility throughout her life. When Wen Fu proposes marriage, she is both eager to leave her uncle's house and aware of her duty to marry. Her father talks to her after he has approved the union and reminds her that, as a wife, her duty will be to honor and obey her husband. She soon realizes that Wen Fu is an evil and sadistic man, but her duty (and lack of power to leave) forces her to stay with him. As an adult in America, Winnie dutifully takes care of Auntie Du in her old age.

Although she is fully assimilated into Western culture, Pearl also recognizes the importance of duty, although to a lesser degree. She attends family gatherings only out of duty, as is typical for many Americans. Pearl is uncertain why she continues to fulfill family obligations that she has come to resent. She also perceives a sense of duty in her husband as she notices that their arguments become less petty after the birth of their first child. She comments in chapter one that this is "perhaps because Phil developed a sense of duty toward the baby, as well as to me, or at least to my medical condition."

Luck

Winnie makes frequent references to luck. She believes that luck plays a major role in people's lives and that people have the power to improve their luck. By the same token, people can do things□intentionally or unintentionally□to attract bad luck. This is illustrated in the idea of *daomei,* which asserts that negative thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Winnie imagines her husband dying while engaged in air battle, and he returns wounded, filling her with guilt for having made it happen. The Chinese New Year is considered a time when people can change their luck, so they perform rituals and visit fortune-tellers to discover their lucky days and numbers. Even minor domestic occurrences are regarded as having an effect on luck. One of Uncle's wives reprimands a cook for cutting squid the wrong way because it will not form good-luck balls. Another example is the Kitchen God, whose role as a minor deity is to report to the Jade Emperor all those who have behaved well and who have behaved badly. This determines who receives good luck and who receives bad luck. To gain the Kitchen God's favor and manipulate their chances of being blessed with good luck, people offer him gifts and burn incense in his honor.

Winnie also believes that some people are lucky throughout their lives and that Helen is one of them. She states in chapter three:

Helen thinks all her decisions are always right, but
really, she is only lucky. For over fifty years I have

seen this happen, how her foolish thinking turns into good fortune.. . . Even though Helen is not smart, even though she was born poor, even though she has never been pretty, she has always had luck pour onto her plate.

Situations can also be a source of bad luck. When Winnie's mother marries Jiang, she occupies the position as second wife to replace a wife who killed herself. Because of the circumstances, the second wife's place is considered bad luck, and Winnie's mother's mysterious disappearance seems to confirm this. Early in their relationship, Helen tells Winnie that the city of Loyang was once famous for having one hundred thousand statues of Buddha. Now, however, the Buddhas' heads have been cut off, so if the air force sends them there, a place filled with wounded Buddhas, it can only mean tragic luck.

Conflict

Conflict exists at every level in the novel, ranging from mother-daughter conflicts to international warfare. Winnie experiences conflict with her cruel husband. The conflict between Winnie and Helen is so embedded in their relationship, it is not a threat to their longstanding friendship. Pearl is in cultural and generational conflict with her immigrant mother.

The Japanese invasion of China provides a backdrop of terrifying conflict that is present throughout most of Winnie's young womanhood. Winnie, Helen, and the others in their group hear horrific stories of wartime violence and bloodshed. At the same time, China was enduring internal political conflict. Winnie comments in chapter nine:

That's how everything was in China then. Too busy fighting each other to fight together. And not just the Americans and the Chinese. The old revolutionaries, the new revolutionaries, the Kuomintang [Nationalists] and the Communists, the warlords, the bandits, and the students□gwah! gwah! gwah!□everybody squabbling, like old roosters claiming the same sunrise.

Patriarchal Society

The Kitchen God's Wife illustrates several facets of the humble status of women in Chinese society in the early twentieth century. The arranged marriage demonstrates the woman's lack of control over her own life and her inability to pursue any other course than that which is expected of her. Wen Fu's proposal is approved by Winnie's father after which Winnie must submit to Wen Fu's cruel whims. His family rapidly depletes her dowry, and she is powerless to object. Her story is unusual, however, because she ultimately escapes by fleeing China and going to America. Her discovery of a group of

runaway wives suggests hope because she is not alone in her willingness to take risks to live differently.

Women were not considered suitable for a thorough education because as domestic figures they were not expected to voice opinions or engage in intellectual discussions. In chapter five, Winnie recalls that her grandfather did not want to send her mother away to school:

> That was the modern thought□educate sons, educate daughters a little to prove you were not too feudalthinking. But Gung-gung did not want to send her to France, or England, or America.. . . Why should he educate a daughter only to turn her into a girl he did not like?"

Style

First-Person Narration

The Kitchen God's Wife is an interesting example of a first-person narrative because of its complexity. The story is told from both Pearl's and Winnie's points of view, and Winnie talks about both the past and the present. The structure of the novel, with the mother and daughter as the speakers, suggests indirect communication between the two of them through the reader. Of course, by the end of the novel, this has become direct communication as the two women share the secrets they have hidden from each other.

As Winnie tells her life story to her daughter, she occasionally makes a reference to contemporary life or asks Pearl a question, which reminds the reader that the story is being told by Winnie to her daughter as they sit in Winnie's kitchen. The tone is confessional and reminiscent of the oral tradition as Winnie relates events of the past with the wisdom of the present. Critics commend Tan's ability to create unique voices for Pearl and Winnie. When Winnie speaks, her syntax, word choice, and idioms all support the realism of the speaker. In contrast, when Pearl speaks, the text reads just as if a typical American were speaking.

Roman à Clef

Because Winnie's story is drawn heavily from Tan's mother's life, the inclusion of actual historical events and figures is not surprising. In fact, the historical context is so striking and real, the novel can be considered a roman à clef, which is a novel in which real people and events are presented in a fictional context. Examples of this type of novel include Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables.*

There are many real events and people in the novel. Winnie, of course, is based on Daisy Tan, the author's mother. Wen Fu is based on Daisy's first husband. The social context of the novel, with its patriarchy and arranged marriages, is an accurate depiction of what life was like in China at that time. The details of the war, from the stories of cities bombed by the Japanese to the character of Claire Chennault, are drawn directly from history.

Detailed Descriptions

In *The Kitchen God's Wife,* Tan includes lots of domestic details and descriptions of landscapes to give the reader a strong sense of the characters' lives. This serves two purposes: first, it draws the reader into the story and brings the characters and scenes to life; second, it provides much-needed context for Western readers, to whom the characters and their surroundings are unfamiliar. Domestic details include food preparation, the importance of good sewing needles, and the social separation between

men and women in the home. At night, the men play cards and smoke while the women attend to household duties or sit quietly. Each time the pilots and their wives move, Tan presents rich descriptions of the landscapes, including ponds, trees, rolling hills, and the darkness of night.

Tan also includes a great deal of sensory detail. This type of detail helps create vivid atmosphere and appeals to the universal experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. In chapter one, Pearl visits her mother in her flower shop:

> I open the door and bells jangle. I'm instantly engulfed in the pungent smell of gardenias, a scent I've always associated with funeral parlors. The place is dimly lit, with only one fluorescent tube hanging over the cash register.

In this short excerpt, Tan includes sound, smell, and sight, describing fully the experience of walking into the flower shop. Tan also shows how a sensory experience can have an emotional impact, as when Pearl and her family stay at Winnie's house before Auntie Du's funeral. Pearl and Winnie have said good night, and Pearl notes, "I hold my breath. There is only silence. And finally, I hear her slippers slowly padding down the hallway, each soft shuffle breaking my heart." Later, Winnie explains that she can no longer stand the taste of eels because of an experience during the war. She and her group had left Nanking, and as they were enjoying the delicacy of white eels, Nanking was ravaged and its people brutalized. Because of her overwhelming guilt, she can never eat eels again. She wonders in chapter thirteen, "Why do some memories live only in your tongue or in your nose? Why do others always stay in your heart?"

Literary Devices

Perhaps Tan's education in English accounts for her use of a wide variety of literary devices. Inventive similes intrigue the reader, as in chapter one, when Pearl thinks, "I've always found [funeral] wreaths hideously sad, like decorative lifesavers thrown out too late." As Winnie tells her story, there are occasional instances of foreshadowing. In chapter eight, she remarks, "Of course, maybe my marriage never really had a chance... But without the worries Peanut put in my head, maybe I would have found a few moments of happiness before all the truth came out." Some of the Chinese words are examples of onomatopoeia, such as the fish called the "wah-wah yu," named for the sound it makes, which resembles a baby crying.

Historical Context

Political Climate

Winnie's story takes place in pre-communist China when China endured internal struggles between the Nationalists and the Communists, in addition to attacks by Japan. Because China had grown wealthy under Nationalist rule, Japan was eager to claim it. While defending their country, members of the Nationalist and Communist parties joined forces. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and attacked the rest of the country in 1937. That year, Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader, recruited American pilot Claire Chennault out of retirement to train pilots with little military experience. Despite cynicism about the project, Chennault's squadron soon became a respected military force. In *The Kitchen God's Wife,* Winnie meets Chennault in Hangchow, and she comments on the Chinese name he has been given, which sounds very much like his American name and means "noisy lightning."

War ravaged China until 1942 when Japanese defeat was imminent. With the external threat diminished, the Communist Party soon reemerged in a struggle for power. This was called the Liberation War, and it lasted from 1946 to 1949, ending with Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan. Fearing Communist rule, many people fled the country just before it officially became the People's Republic of China.

Superstition and Religion

In *The Kitchen God's Wife,* many characters hold syncretic, or combined, beliefs, which represent a blend of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and popular lore. At the center of syncretism is the individual's impulse to master his or her fate. This is reflected in the belief that one's thoughts and actions, intentional or not, make a difference in what happens. *Daomei,* for example, is the belief that negative thoughts and feelings bring about unlucky events. Winnie imagines her husband dying in battle and is filled with guilt when he returns injured. Even before Pearl hears her mother's story, she knows how important *daomei* is to Winnie. Pearl thinks that if she tells her mother about her multiple sclerosis, Winnie will somehow blame herself for Pearl's illness.

Superstition plays a major role in many of the characters' lives. The altar to the Kitchen God is a way to influence the deity to bring good luck to the family, a practice that goes back as far as the eighth century B.C. People believe that if they behave properly and offer gifts, the Kitchen God will take good reports of them to the Jade Emperor. The Chinese New Year involves various rituals that are intended to bring about good luck in the coming year. People consult fortune-tellers and astrologers regarding what can be expected. If the news is bad, fortune-tellers provide corrective practices or rituals that individuals can perform to change their luck. In the novel, Peanut does not like what the fortune-teller says about her marriage prospects, so she has the fortune-teller change

things. Winnie believes that the husband Peanut should have had was Wen Fu, who married her instead.

Marriage and Women

According to Chinese tradition at the time of Winnie's youth, marriages were arranged to make a good match for the families. This meant that little attention was given to whether the pairing was suitable for the bride and groom. Men sought to marry into wealthy or powerful families that could improve their social standing. As for women, their needs and desires were of no consequence. The bigger the dowry a young wife brought to her new family, the better. It was the father's responsibility to approve the match, making sure that his daughter was marrying into a respectable family. In *The Kitchen God's Wife,* Winnie's father approves her marriage to Wen Fu, explaining to her that once she is married, her opinions will be of no value. Instead, she is expected to think only of her husband's wishes. Later, when she realizes that her father knew what kind of people Wen Fu's family were, she understands that by letting her marry Wen Fu, her father was demonstrating that she was of little value.

Once married, a woman was placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of her husband's household. Men had multiple wives, and the older wives were more powerful than the newer wives. At the top of the hierarchy was the man, who was granted complete control over his wives and children. In abusive situations, there was nothing women or children could do. Although *The Kitchen God's Wife* is based on Tan's mother's story, there is one important episode that was completely changed. In reality, Daisy's mother did not simply disappear one day but was widowed at a young age before her husband had been able to take a good-paying job. She was raped and then taken as a concubine into the dead man's family where she endured humiliation and shame. To preserve her son's honor, she abandoned him so that he would not be associated with her. She then took her daughter and fled to Shanghai. On New Year's Eve, she committed suicide by hiding a lethal dose of opium in her rice cake. Daisy told Tan this story to show how vulnerable and powerless women were in early twentieth- century China.

Critical Overview

After the success Tan enjoyed from her first novel, the challenge of releasing a second novel was daunting. The much-anticipated publication of *The Kitchen God's Wife,* captured the attention of readers and critics alike. Response was overwhelmingly positive as readers found themselves swept up in the drama and detailed storytelling that had made *The Joy Luck Club* so impressive.

While critics can be harsh on authors whose second books are noticeably weaker than their first, reviewers declared *The Kitchen God's Wife* at least as good as *The Joy Luck Club.* In fact, Wendy Law- Yone of *Washington Post Book World* declared *The Kitchen God's Wife* "bigger, bolder, and, I have to say, better" than Tan's first novel. Similarly, Pico Iyer of *Time* commented that "Tan has transcended herself again." In *Women's Review of Books,* critic Helen Yglesias expressed her certainty that "readers who loved the first [book] will surely love the second, since both tell the same story□and this time around Tan has executed the work better in conception, in design, in detail and in sheer pleasure for the reader." Reviewers found that by focusing on one woman's story (rather than a group of four, as in *The Joy Luck Club*), the novel exhibits more unity and compels the reader to feel more compassion.

Critics were generally impressed with Tan's techniques in *The Kitchen God's Wife.* Yglesias noted, "Amy Tan commands an intriguing style, which, along with her highly specialized subject matter, makes for a unique contribution to contemporary writing.. . . Tan is gifted with a quirky style, a broad historical sense, and great energy as a storyteller." Many reviewers were especially taken with Tan's inclusion of details in creating the novel's settings and the characters' daily lives. "It is in its details that *The Kitchen God's Wife* excels," wrote Yglesias, adding, "Tan weaves trivia into rich and illuminating character portrayal, treasures that literally appear on every page." In *Belles Lettres,* Scarlet Cheng wrote, "Tan captures beautifully this helter-skelter period in China."

Criticism is divided on the subjects of characterization and plot structure. Elgy Gillespie of *San Francisco Review of Books* found that although the characters are sometimes exaggerated, the dialogue brings each one to life. Christopher Lehmann- Haupt of *New York Times Book Review,* however, concluded that the portrayal of Wen Fu, Winnie's first husband, undermines the novel. He declared that

> the novel's fairy tale quality also works against it, particularly in the character of Winnie's evil husband, Wen Fu, a man of such one-dimensional malevolence that one can only regard him as a caricature. . . . There is no accounting for Wen Fu, and this inexplicability shrinks Ms. Tan's story to the moral dimension of pop fiction.

Lehmann-Haupt concluded, "Where Ms. Tan writes about contemporary Chinese Americans, her portraits are often witty and complex. . . . But the plight of a maiden victimized by an arranged marriage seems very old stuff. Amy Tan can probably do better. One hopes that she soon will." A few critics found the novel's structure arduous, as the narrative switches back and forth from past to present. Robb Forman Dew of *New York Times Book Review* wrote:

> It is irritating each time she insists on bringing us back from Winnie's mesmerizing tale. Whenever Winnie halts her narrative to ask her daughter some question whose answer we only infer□Pearl does not speak□Ms. Tan challenges our suspension of disbelief. But never mind. . . . Don't worry about the obstacle of the framework of this novel, simply give yourself over to the world Ms. Tan creates for you. It's the story she tells that really matters.

Critics admired the poignant and moving storytelling and the bittersweet humor of the novel. Charles Solomon of *Los Angeles Times Book Review* found that the novel shows how "shared afflictions can create ties between people closer than blood relationships." Dew introduced his discussion of Tan's novel by stating, "Within the peculiar construction of Amy Tan's second novel is a harrowing, compelling, and at times bitterly humorous tale in which an entire world unfolds in a Tolstoyan tide of event and detail." Sabine Durrant of London *Times* described the book as "gripping" and "enchanting," while Charles Foran of Toronto *Globe and Mail* deemed it "a fine novel" carried by its "exuberant storytelling and rich drama."

Commenting on *The Kitchen God's Wife*'s bestselling status, Gillespie discouraged readers from assuming that the book lacks literary merit. Gillespie noted, "It is. . . quite possible for a bestseller to be an estimable piece of writing as well as a ripping read." Similarly, Judith Caesar of *North Dakota Quarterly* explained:

> Under the outward layer of a highly readable popular novel, Tan has written an extremely complex postmodern literary novel that challenges the dominant narratives of contemporary American society, particularly our ideas of who matters and who does not, of whose version is 'true' and whose is not, and indeed of how one can find what is true.

The result of Tan's mainstream appeal, Gillespie added, is that many Americans gain "an education for the heart," having learned about the forgotten millions who suffered throughout Chinese history and "how, why, and from where Chinese- American society evolved." In the same vein, Caesar wrote, "Tan verifies the reality of a world outside the American experience as nevertheless part of the human experience and questions the sense of entitlement and cultural superiority that allows Americans to dismiss the sufferings of foreigners." Gillespie declared that Tan's achievement in this sense is

significant: "All this is the most important job of fiction, of course; and since Chinese women lived lives not just of forgotten obscurity, but of hermetically sealed oblivion, Tan is handing us a key with no price tag and letting us open the brassbolted door."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she discusses the tension between Eastern culture and Western culture in Tan's novel.

Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* has been compared in various ways to Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club.* Both novels have garnered the praise of critics and readers, most of whom cannot help but notice the similarities between the two books. Perhaps the most obvious similarity is the theme of mother-daughter conflict as the result of Americanized daughters having so little in common with their immigrant mothers. This tension□really a tension between Eastern and Western cultures□is at the heart of *The Kitchen God's Wife,* in which Pearl has trouble relating to her mother, Winnie. The plot development, however, takes these two characters from distance to understanding and respect. The story is about how secrets create distance in the relationships that should be closest. Once Winnie has told Pearl all of her secrets from her life in China, Pearl is free to tell Winnie her own secret□that she has multiple sclerosis. With insight into each other's struggles, these two women come to common ground in a very unexpected way, and they do so without compromising their distinctly Eastern (Winnie) and Western (Pearl) identities.

Winnie, although she lives in the United States, is still very much a Chinese woman. She lives in San Francisco and co-owns a flower shop in Chinatown with her lifelong friend, Helen. She has found a place in America where she can still feel like she is in her element and resist assimilating without sacrifice. She is displaced; after all, she left China to escape her husband, not because she didn't love her country. She has built a life for herself in America, but that life is deeply rooted in her friends and family, who are also Chinese. Many of them are figures from her stormy past and thus perhaps represent the best of the life she led in China.

Winnie resists becoming Americanized and often scoffs at Western ways of doing things. Describing her uncle, she says that every year he took up a new hobby such as growing flowers. She remarks in chapter six, "He always called it 'hobby,' just like the English, no Chinese word for doing something only to waste time, waste money." In chapter twelve, she describes putting on her coat and shoes to walk into town, three or four *li* away. She explains to Pearl that a *li* is about a half-mile, adding, "'And I had to walk that distance. I wasn't like you, getting into a car to go two blocks to the grocery store.' " Similarly, she describes the truck that carried her and the air force group across the country. It pulled a tank of gas behind it because "that was the only way to get to Kunming back then. We didn't have gas stations every ten miles, no such thing. And we did not travel on big highways, with seventy-mile-an-hour speed limits." Winnie means only to express her pride in her native land and to emphasize how difficult life was for her then, especially compared to Pearl's life of convenience. In chapter thirteen, she remarks:

> We didn't complain too much. Chinese people know how to adapt to almost anything. It didn't matter what your background was, rich or poor. We always knew: Our situation could change any minute. You're lucky you were born in this country. You never had to think that way.

Of course, the irony in Winnie's statement is that she has not adapted to American life. Perhaps this is simply a choice, not a matter of not knowing how to adapt; she simply chooses to live as Chinese a life as she can.

Many of Winnie's characteristics point to her Chinese heritage and lifestyle. Her reliance on superstition and luck is a critical part of her thinking. Despite marrying a Baptist minister, she adheres to the religion of her past, complete with household deities, like the Kitchen God, and ghosts. Her daughter Pearl recalls a childhood memory of seeing a ghost swirl out of a jack-o-lantern's mouth. She told her mother, who immediately began searching for the ghost. Winnie's father, on the other hand, explained that there are no such things as ghosts, and that the only ghost is the Holy Ghost, who would never try to scare children. Pearl remarks,

> I was not comforted by his answer, because my mother had then stared at me, as if I had betrayed her and made her look like a fool. That's how things were. She was always trying to suppress certain beliefs that did not coincide with my father's Christian ones, but sometimes they popped out anyway.

This memory reveals another important side of Winnie's character, which is her driving sense of duty. From her first days as Wen Fu's bride, she understood that her role was to obey and please her husband. Even as the wife of a different man in America, she still tries to suppress her own religious beliefs in favor of her husband's. When Auntie Du comes to America, Winnie considers it her duty to take care of the old woman until her death.

In Winnie's language and conduct, she exhibits many characteristics of Eastern culture. She is subtle and often talks around what she means to say, a method of communication that is lost on her daughter. Other Chinese people of Winnie's generation, however, understand exactly what is being said, even when someone is speaking indirectly. Persuading her daughter to stay for Auntie Du's funeral, Winnie tells Pearl that Auntie Du was always proud of her. Winnie knows that what Auntie Du meant by this was that she loved Pearl. Winnie is often aware of the differences in the Chinese and English languages. Just as she states that there is no Chinese word for *hobby,* she describes her relationship with Helen in chapter three by saying, "And yet we are closer perhaps than sisters, related by fate, joined by debts. I have kept her secrets. She has kept mine. And we have a kind of loyalty that has no word in this country." Winnie also speaks in metaphors and similes that draw from nature, which is regarded as consistent with Eastern expression. In chapter three, for example, she comments, "If I try to say

what happened, my story would not flow forward like a river from the beginning to the end, everything connected, the lake to the sea."

Pearl, in contrast to Winnie, is representative of the Western sensibility. Although she is only one generation removed from China, she has lived her entire life in America. She and her Anglo husband and their two daughters live in the city and lead typical middle-class American lives. She is a linguist who works with mentally challenged children, and he is a pathologist. She enjoys a satisfying marriage in which she and her husband share power, and she is comfortable with keeping a comfortable distance between herself and her family in San Francisco. Pearl is so unfamiliar with the nuances of Chinese conduct and culture that she sometimes missteps in the presence of the older members of her family. She speaks only a little Mandarin and is uncertain about what happens at a Buddhist funeral. Because her life experience has been so different from her mother's, the two have little common ground on which to build a relationship.

In the landscape of her extended family, Pearl is the bridge between life in China and life in America. Had she not been given the opportunity to learn about her mother's painful and dramatic past, it is likely that Pearl's daughters would have no connection whatsoever to their Chinese roots. The Kitchen God's altar would be, as suggested by Pearl's husband, Phil, nothing but a dollhouse for their playtime until they grew tired of it.

While Winnie talks around topics, Pearl is a typical American in that she believes in talking plainly about what needs to be said. When Winnie expresses her wish that Helen had been more helpful in caring for Auntie Du, Pearl simply suggests that she tell Helen how she feels. At the same time, when Pearl talks to her mother, she tends to avoid certain topics and maintains a polite distance in their conversations. This is not the direct approach she advocates, but she understands that her mother's communication is different than her own and tries to "meet her halfway."

Tan intersperses numerous reminders of how different Eastern and Western cultures are. This serves to keep the theme close to the surface without placing all the weight of the theme on the mother-daughter relationship. After the funeral, for example, Pearl, Phil, and their girls are back at Winnie's house. Phil is anxious to get started on the drive back home (the Western way), but Winnie is unconcerned with his impatience and continues to talk to her daughter. When Winnie tells the story of the Kitchen God in chapter two, she tries to explain his status by comparing him to a store manager, who is "important, but still many, many bosses above him." Pearl notices Phil chuckling at Winnie's attempts to provide an American context, and she wonders if that is how her mother thinks of Chinese deities or if her comparison is strictly for their benefit. Later in the conversation, Phil likens the Kitchen God to Santa Claus because he reports on who has been good and who has been bad. Winnie responds, "'He is not Santa Claus. More like a spy□FBI agent, CIA, Mafia, worse than IRS, that kind of person!'"

In their expression of affection, the Western characters are much more demonstrative than the Eastern characters. When Pearl first sees her mother after arriving in town for the banquet, the two begin a superficial conversation. Pearl thinks, "Although we have

not seen each other since Christmas, almost a month ago, we do none of the casual hugs and kisses Phil and I exchange when we see his parents and friends." In chapter seven, Winnie describes seeing her father after twelve years of absence, when she comes seeking his approval for her marriage. She says, "'Of course, he did not hug me and kiss me, not the way you Americans do when you have been reunited after five minutes' separation. We did not even talk very long after my aunties left.'"

As the story closes, Winnie and Pearl have come to better understand each other's personal struggles and, as a result, regard each other with more compassion and respect. By portraying, in these two characters, the Eastern and Western sides of her own identity, Tan allows the reader to see how the two cultures clash but also how they can coexist. Many critics credit Tan with opening American readers to the beauty and depth of Chinese culture and thus paving the way for other Asian-American writers. In a sense, the bridge created between Winnie and Pearl is a bridge that takes American readers to an understanding and appreciation of Eastern belief, thought, and behavior.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *The Kitchen God's Wife,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Caesar asserts that The Kitchen God's Wife *is "an extremely complex postmodern literary novel that challenges the dominant narratives of contemporary American society, particularly our ideas of who matters and who does not."*

If, as Jean-Francois Lyotard says, a "master narrative" is required to legitimate artistic expression, for the past thirty years the legitimizing narrative of mainstream American literary realism has been the quest for personal fulfillment. The increasingly stagnant, if not outright polluted, mainstream has produced novel after novel concerning the mid-life crises (and sometimes accompanying marital infidelities) of self-centered American men, with even the once rich Jewish and Southern literary traditions now given over to novels like Bernard Malamud's *Dubin's Lives,* Walker Percy's *The Second Coming,* and Reynolds Price's *Blue Calhoun,* all concerning a middle-aged (and in the first two instances, wealthy) white man's discontent. All are a far cry from the writers' earlier ethical and philosophical concerns. The consideration of the reflective person's stance toward questions of political and social justice, central to the 19th-and early 20th-century novel from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* to Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls,* seems to have become limited to experimental postmodern novels (E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime,* Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*) and to the kinds of essays on domestic politics, international affairs, and human rights that appear in *The New Yorker, Harpers',* and *The Nation.* Worse, American literary realism's concentration on the purely personal has led to a delegitimation of other experience, namely, the experience of introspective and articulate people who have lived lives devastated by social and political forces outside their control. These people are relegated to inarticulate images on the television screen□in Sarajevo, in Somalia, in the Middle East, in Thailand, and in China. These people, then, whose real stories and histories remain untold to the American public, become less "real" than many of the characters who populate American literary fiction.

In this context, it is very significant that the supposedly "popular" novels of minority American women□Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich, and now Amy Tan□seem to be reaching a larger audience than much mainstream literary realism. In part, this is because all five can create such an engaging and often witty surface and because all seem to deal with the popular topics of TV talk shows: spouse abuse, recovering from divorce, finding one's roots, etc. And of course all are hyphenated Americans of some sort, a fact which engages the curiosity of readers who do not share the writers' backgrounds. (Chicana and Native American writers like Sandra Cisneros and Leslie Silko, who use more experimental techniques and deal with a wider range of subject matter, have yet to reach the Waldenbooks reader.)

Yet Tan, for one, does much more than articulate popular media issues. She causes us to question the very basis of how we know what we know. She creates her own narrative by seeming to affirm popular American assumptions in the formula of the

popular novel and then undermining that very narrative in a complex political allegory that questions the basic American (indeed Western) concepts of truth and rationality.

In keeping with this subtly deceptive plan, *The Kitchen God's Wife* seems at first like a lively but somewhat clichéd popular novel, a modern pseudofeminist retelling of the folklore story of the abused wife (patient Griselda in the West, the kitchen god's wife in the East) who wins her husband's love by passing all his tests or his remorse by her generosity of spirit. What makes it modern is that the abused wife is angry at her ill treatment and seemingly "finds herself" in that anger. The women, moreover, are the "good guys" while the men seem quite unrelievedly evil, with the exception of the male rescuer. It seems, in short, to be a type of formula novel which provides women readers with clear heroines, heroes, and villains, all without disrupting the Gothic romance's illusion of rescue by "the right man." Jiang Weili, the narrator of the central three-fourths of the novel, endures the most horrifying abuse from her brutal husband, Wen Fu, while traditional Chinese society not only fails to intervene but colludes in her victimization. The only twist seems to be that instead of winning her husband's love, Weili is rescued by a handsome prince, in this case, Jimmy Louie, a Chinese-American soldier who marries her and takes her back to the United States. In fact, one can see the novel as a rather smug indictment of the misery of women in traditional Chinese society in contrast to American society's enlightened feminism. Moreover, the story that frames the story, that of Jiang Weili's daughter Pearl and her relationship with her mother, seems like yet another story about returning to one's roots to discover some less complicated identity. In short, there seems little here to challenge conventional American thinking.

Yet nothing in the novel is as it seems. Certainly, in the beginning, nothing is as it seems to Weili's American-born daughter Pearl, who narrates the opening chapters of the novel and embodies the American sensibility in all its directness and in all its limitations. Like well-meaning Americans in China, Pearl makes cultural gaffes in dealing with the older Chinese-American community and even with her mother because she doesn't seem to understand the differences between outer display and actual feeling or the realm of implied meanings that are so much a part of Chinese tradition. Thus, at the funeral of elderly Grand Auntie Du which opens the novel, Pearl sees a group of sobbing women in threadbare padded jackets and takes them for recent immigrants from China, Grand Auntie Du's "real friends," when in fact they are Vietnamese professional mourners. Worse, with all the confidence of American pop psychology, Pearl advises her mother to speak frankly to her contemporary, Auntie Helen, about her feelings that Auntie Helen should be sharing more in Grand Auntie Du's care. Pearl says,

"Why don't you just tell Auntie Helen how you feel
and stop complaining?" This is what Phil [Pearl's Anglo
husband] had suggested I say, a perfectly reasonable
way to get my mother to realize what was>
making her miserable so she could finally take positive
action.

Of course, Pearl doesn't realize that her mother is quietly boasting to Pearl about her own dutifulness and implying that more could be expected of Pearl as well. Thus, Pearl

is shocked when her mother is so profoundly offended that she will barely speak to her for a month.

She knows her mother as Winnie Louie, her American name, her kindly but often inexplicably crotchety mother to whom she is bound by sometimes tiresome traditions that don't seem to apply to other Americans. She doesn't realize until the end of the novel that her mother is also Jiang Weili, a woman brought up in China who has survived both a disastrous marriage and the invasion and occupation of her country by a brutal enemy army. And because she doesn't know who her mother is, Pearl also doesn't know that she herself is not the daughter of the kindly Jimmy Louie but of Wen Fu, the brutal first husband. This is but one of the novel's pattern of multiple and mistaken identities that suggests the ambiguity of all knowledge and the incompleteness of the official (legitimate) narrative.

In particular, the novel explores the incompleteness of the American narrative, an incompleteness that comes from a refusal to see the validity of the knowledge of other cultures or of the experiences of people who are not Americans. Pearl, with her confident American knowledge of the way things are, her faulty Mandarin, and her imperviousness to implied meanings, misses much of what is going on beneath the surface, although she is sensitive enough sometimes to realize that there are some things she doesn't understand: ". . . apparently, there's a lot I don't know about my mother and Auntie Helen," she thinks at one point. Since the bulk of the novel is Weili's story, it would seem that one of the purposes of having Pearl as the initial narrator is not only to contrast the American sensibility with the Chinese, but to alert the American reader to the subtext beneath Jiang Weili's story as well. Although the reader would first identify with the American, Pearl, it is very clear that Pearl doesn't know all that needs to be known.

Weili's story is also much more than it would first seem to an American reader. Most obviously, Jiang Weili's is the story of a progressively more violent and degrading marriage set against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion of China. Weili is married off to a man of a socially "suitable" family, although both her father and her aunts and uncles clearly have a sense of the man's flawed character. Because they know something of his deceptiveness, if not his outright cruelty, they marry Weili to him and not her favored cousin, nicknamed Peanut, who had wanted to marry her. Wen Fu proves to be a sexual sadist who delights in humiliation games, a liar who uses his dead brother's diplomas to become an officer in the Nationalist air force (another confused identity), and a coward who manages to save his own life throughout the war by deserting his fellow pilots whenever they encounter Japanese aircraft. Because of Wen Fu's social position, however, no one acknowledges any of these failings.

As the war continues and the Nationalist army flees from Shanghai to Nanjing and finally to Kunming, so Wen Fu degenerates. He refuses to leave a card game to get a doctor for his sick daughter, and then he publicly blames Weili when the child dies. He brings a concubine into the house and then discards her when she becomes pregnant. He forces Weili to "admit" publicly to being a prostitute, despite her very obvious fidelity. He is the enemy of whatever is life-affirming and generous (Weili's maternal responses

to save her child, her sisterly desire to help the ignorant concubine) disguised as patriarchal morality. Throughout all of this abuse, no one interferes; in fact, when Weili tries to run away from Wen Fu, her friends Hulan (later Helen) and Auntie Du tell him her hiding place. The increasing viciousness of Wen Fu parallels the increasing closeness of the Japanese army, so that by the time Weili has run away and been brought back to a still more degraded life, the Japanese are bombing Kunming.

The parallel between the victimization of Weili and the Japanese conquest of China is further emphasized by the fact that old Jiang, Weili's father, has collaborated with the Japanese, betraying his country in the same way he betrayed his daughter. His pattern of ineffectual resistance and subsequent capitulation, moreover, continues throughout the novel. He throws a teacup against a priceless painting to show that he would rather destroy China's heritage than betray it—and then accedes to Japanese demands; in Shanghai, when both he and Weili are Wen Fu's victims, he gives Weili the money with which to leave Wen Fu—and then is too ill to help her when Wen Fu accuses her of theft and has her imprisoned.

Even at this level of the political allegory, however, there is little in equating Chinese patriarchy with Japanese expansionism and imperialism that would discomfort or challenge an American reader. It is still "those people" who have done these terrible things, not "us." Yet it is not so comforting if one carries the political allegory to its logical conclusions. Weili's victimization couldn't have taken place if Chinese society had not condoned it to such an extent that even her best friends didn't want to blemish their reputations by helping her escape— at least until the very end of the novel, when they try to get her out of jail (ineffectually, it turns out) by saying that they had witnessed her divorce. These friends, who later join her in the United States, are not all that different from the United States itself, which, as Tan points out, helped to keep the Japanese war machine running by supplying the Japanese with oil and scrap metal all through the 1930s and later helped China only after the United States itself was under attack. Hulan thinks that she freed Weili through her second husband's influence with the Nationalist government; in fact, it is Weili's cousin Peanut, now a communist cadre who runs a shelter for abused wives, who gets Weili out of prison because Nationalist officials in charge of Weili's case fear reprisals from the communists. If Weili is China, then it is a communist who helps to liberate her, although the liberation is far from complete.

Moreover, if we interpret the novel as a fairly literal political allegory, there is yet another disturbing implication. Wen Fu is never punished. When Weili finally gets word of his death, she learns that he has died an old man, surrounded by his family and respected by his community—the very definition of a righteous man's proper death in Chinese tradition. In contrast, Weili's good husband Jimmy Louie dies relatively young and in great pain, seemingly denied by Pearl, the daughter whom he raised. The pain and prematurity of Jimmy's death is one reason it so haunts Weili. Weili, furthermore, is eking out a living in a foreign country (America), widowed and at least, as the book opens, culturally estranged from her children. One could see this as paralleling the fact that all the former imperial powers—Japan among them—are both more prosperous and more respected than their former victims. To cite the most literal sort of example, the Western media tends to blame the human rights abuses and the political unrest in

China and the rest of the former colonial world on the ideological systems that ejected the colonial powers, not on the after-effects of imperialism itself. And the crimes of imperialism did go unpunished. The war crimes trials after World War II focused on the Japanese abuse of western POWs, not on the Japanese imprisonment and massacre of millions of Chinese civilians.

One reason for Tan's equation of imperialism and patriarchy is essentially rhetorical. It is easier for an American audience to sympathize with the victims of patriarchy than with the victims of imperialism. Many American women have been the victims of patriarchy, after all, while very few have been the victims of imperialism. We have not had our country invaded and occupied by a foreign army or had laws imposed on us by people who didn't know our language or culture□except, of course, for Native Americans. The type of suffering Weili endures, moreover, is primarily emotional and psychological rather than physical. She is humiliated and exploited; she cannot even complain about her plight. But she is not being starved, beaten, or tortured at a time when millions of her countrymen (and women) were, as Weili herself points out. Weili's suffering is that of a middleclass woman married to a bully. An American reader can identify with this, at least to some degree; and once one has done this, one can begin to get a sense of the type of suffering that Tan suggests only metaphorically or seemingly incidentally □the Nanjing massacre, for instance. Then other events fit into place. Weili and Wen Fu's children die, one the direct victim of Wen Fu's neglect, two the indirect victims of the Japanese. Tan's presentation helps to legitimize a narrative of suffering otherwise so far outside the American experience that it could seem beyond our capacity for empathy.

But there are more complex philosophical reasons for linking imperialism and patriarchy. For one thing, they both shape the "legitimate" printed narratives of Weili's story. To the Shanghai press covering Weili's case, Wen Fu is a war hero whose wife has been seduced and corrupted by a lecherous American. In this patriarchal narrative, Weili wants to escape Wen Fu not because she has been abused, but because she is "crazy for American sex." This is as true as the printed leaflets the Japanese drop on Nanjing, explaining that civilians will not be harmed.

Behind these official narratives is the assumption that some people's suffering is more significant than other people's sufferings. The Chinese historian Szuma Chien once ironically remarked that some deaths are as heavy as Mount Tai, while others are lighter than a feather□that is, in official versions of events. Thus, the honor of men is more important than the dignity of women, and the deaths of ordinary Chinese simply aren't important at all. This assumption isn't merely Oriental, moreover, since it underlies the current American narrative that the personal emotional crisis of an American is the only suffering interesting enough to write about. The official narratives are used to ignore or justify the sufferings of the powerless.

Consequently, all the official facts in Tan's novel are questionable. Weili's divorce is officially valid when Wen Fu holds a gun to her head and makes her sign the paper, but it can be made invalid by her ex-husband's tearing up the paper. What is a divorce and what does it mean under those circumstances? Weili can be "officially" a thief for taking the gold her father gave her, and then later be "officially" innocent when her

imprisonment is termed an "error of the court." Even Pearl's official American knowledge that World War II began with the bombing of Pearl Harbor is questionable, since, as Weili points out, it began for China with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. (Or did it begin even earlier, with the German concession of the Shantung peninsula to the Japanese?) The Western narrative is at best an incomplete truth. When does a divorce or a war begin or end? The narrative structure of the novel also suggests the problematic nature of truth. As Edward Said has pointed out in *Culture and Imperialism,*

the narrative structure of the classic 19th-century realistic novel, with its omniscient narrator or reliable first-person narrator, helped to underscore the idea of an authoritative and "correct" version of events. Despite the polyphonic narrations of the high modernist novel, the 20th-century popular novel has generally preserved the 19th-century technique, as has much of contemporary literary realism. The modernist novel, moreover, focuses on the psychological and philosophical implications of competing narratives (*Mrs. Dalloway, As I Lay Dying,* etc.), not on their political implication. Much contemporary fiction thus tends to confirm the value of Americanness over foreignness, a kind of contemporary imperialism. (Think, for example, of Cormac McCarthy's National Book Awardwinning *All the Pretty Horses* in which the good guys are all American men and the bad guys either Mexican or female. Consider how different it would be if any of the Mexican or women characters gave their version of events.) In contrast, Tan has two narrators and three versions of events Pearl's, Weili's, and Hulan's, all of which seem credible in some respects.

While Tan's use of a polyphonic narrative is significant in itself, perhaps more significant is who speaks. Through much of the novel, after all, it is an elderly Chinese immigrant whose syntax and word choice reflect the patterns of Chineseaccented English, a speech pattern marginalized and mocked by contemporary mainstream American society. Tan helps to give this voice a validity and dignity in the same way that Walker and Morrison have helped to legitimize African American speech. She has made the sufferings of those who speak in this voice "as heavy as Mount Tai."

The details of the novel confirm both the validity of these Chinese women's experience and the subjective nature of truth. What Hulan remembers is different from what Weili remembers, yet Hulan's insights are given sudden credibility when she tells Pearl, "You know how she [Weili] is, very hard to thank. . .", and we realize how very true this is of both Weili and Pearl. Just as Pearl rejects her "cousin" Mary's comforting casseroles when Mary learns of Pearl's illness, Weili would indeed be repelled by the idea of being indebted to Hulan in any way. We also realize the extent to which Hulan's behavior, which Weili had interpreted as simply contrary and obstructive, was well intended. What is interesting here is that in personal relationships, unlike political ones, conflicting versions of the truth are not necessarily divisive, since neither version is used as a means of control or suppression. Thus even the quarrels between Winnie (once Weili) and Helen (once Hulan) are not precisely quarrels at all. Pearl observes,

watch them continue to argue, although perhaps it
is not arguing. They are remembering together,
dreaming together.

Tan also contradicts this idea of a rational Western truth through the pattern of double and shifting identities of her characters and by her clear indications that the commonly accepted criteria for determining identity are sometimes irrelevant. Tan shows a world of multiple and contradictory truths, truth as a series of Chinese boxes, not a unitary truth to be "discovered" in the Western sense. Tan's is not even a Western "postmodernist" truth of multiple linear narratives, but of contradictory truths and partial truths intermixed in layers of meaning. Through the contradictions in Winnie's (Weili's) character, we see that a complete person can be both large-spirited and petty, loving and distant. Indeed, self-knowledge consists of acknowledging these seemingly contradictory traits. At one point Weili tells Pearl,

I have told you about the early days of my marriage
so you can understand why I became strong and weak
at the same time. Maybe according to your American
mind, you cannot be both, that would be a contradiction.
But according to my life, I had to be both.

The simultaneous existence of these opposites is indeed very different from what our American minds tell us is rational, and thus it calls into question the validity of that rationality.

Moreover, none of the characters is precisely what they seem, even concerning the most common determiner of identity, family relationships. Consider, for instance, the ways in which the characters seem to be related but aren't. Pearl calls Hulan "auntie" and thinks of Hulan's children Bao- Bao and Mary as her cousins. Indeed, Winnie and Helen, with all their feuding and tenderness, act like sisters. And Pearl is as exasperated and yet connected to the "cousins" as she would be with any blood relative, a relationship Tan underscores by using them as foils to Pearl. Pearl has believed the "official version" that Helen is the widow of Winnie's younger brother, but she learns very early in her mother's story that Helen is "merely" a person she has known ever since her youth.

Thus it is not surprising that Pearl's discovery of her parentage, her "real identity" does not have the significance the episode's placement in the novel would seem to grant it. Finally, the great climatic revelation that Wen Fu is Pearl's "real" father seems to be irrelevant after all. It is the pattern formed by all the revelations leading up to it that is important. That Jimmy Louie is Pearl's "real" father is simply one more item in the list of things that seems true, isn't true, and finally is in a larger sense as true as any of the novel's other ambiguous truths. And on the level of character, it doesn't matter either. Pearl is not at all like Wen Fu, as Winnie points out. Ancestry and blood relationship finally do not matter very much□a very non-Chinese idea in a very non-American narrative.

Meaning and truth exist in layers, and what is true on the surface is contradicted by another truth underneath, which is in turn contradicted by a third layer. And all are "true." We see this kind of paradox even in the names of minor characters. Pearl's cousin Roger is named Bao-Bao, "precious baby," because his parents were so happy to finally

have a child, but the nickname sticks as he grows up because it becomes a sarcastic description of his superficial and immature behavior. The only one of the Chinese-American characters to have a Chinese name, he speaks like a cartoon of an American and gets married and divorced as carelessly as a character in a Woody Allen comedy. Is it then because he is so American that he is so superficial? In fact, in his self-centeredness and sexual inconstancy, he seems like a comic and relatively benign version of Wen Fu. He's a beloved precious baby who has become a spoiled precious baby whose faults are equally American and Chinese.

In this context, it is not surprising that nationality doesn't matter very much in determining the identity of both Weili and Pearl either. It merely determines their modes of expression. Pearl is very much an American version of Weili. Like Weili, she is a concerned and loving mother, she faces difficulties (her multiple sclerosis, for example) with such stoicism that she cuts herself off from both her husband and her mother, she is witty and critical, and she is willing to let things be understood without spelling them out. Yet in her manners and beliefs, she is an American. When, at the end, she accepts her mother's herbal cures and the offering to Lady Sorrowfree, she does so as an acceptance of her mother's solicitude, not her beliefs. She hasn't found a "Chinese identity" in the way the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *The Color Purple* find an African identity; instead she has found a closer relationship with her mother and an insight into the seemingly conflicting layers of reality in the world around her, beginning with the multiple identities of her mother and the Chinese "relatives" whom she thought she knew. Personal identity, like both personal and political truth, is many-layered and elusive, something accepted rather than discovered.

Under the outward layer of a highly readable popular novel, Tan has written an extremely complex postmodern literary novel that challenges the dominant narratives of contemporary American society, particularly our ideas of who matters and who does not, of whose version is "true" and whose is not, and indeed of how one can find what is true. Through the voices of characters like Weili and Hulan, Tan presents a world in which complex and intelligent people must find a way of accommodating hostile political and social forces against which they are powerless to rebel□a type of suffering from which most American readers have been sheltered. Thus, Tan verifies the reality of a world outside the American experience as nevertheless part of the human experience and questions the sense of entitlement and cultural superiority that allows Americans to dismiss the sufferings of foreigners. This sense of entitlement, the idea that "our" deaths are as heavy as Mount Tai and "their" deaths are light as feathers underlies the callousness of all imperial narratives□the novels of contemporary America, as well as narratives of the Imperial China of which Szuma Chien wrote and of patriarchal China and Imperial Japan, of which Jiang Weili speaks. By making us question the validity of American knowledge and the "otherness" of what Americans consider foreign, Amy Tan has helped to enlarge the American narrative.

Source: Judith Caesar, "Patriarchy, Imperialism, and Knowledge in *The Kitchen God's Wife,*" in *North Dakota Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No. 4, Fall, 1995, pp. 164-74.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Cheng lauds The Kitchen God's Wife, *stating, "The ending, with its extraordinary convergence of all that has gone on before, is a marvel."*

Yes, it's true: Amy Tan has done it again□with searing clarity of vision she has spun a tale that lyrically weaves past and present, myth and memory. And she has written a true novel this time, one sustained story that lasts all of some four hundred pages.

For the many who read her first book, *The Joy Luck Club,* the second opens on familiar territory□ Pearl is the grown daughter of a very Chinese mother, Winnie, who speaks English with the snappy cadence and salty metaphors of her native tongue and whose way of thinking□of linking the visible and the invisible worlds□has come with her across the Pacific to the San Francisco Bay Area.

While Winnie still lives in Chinatown, Pearl is living fifty miles outside the city with a Caucasian husband and two Americanized little girls. They come together for a cousin's engagement dinner and for an aunt's funeral. Each has been guarding a secret: Pearl has multiple sclerosis; Winnie a checkered past she tried to leave behind in China.

But meddlesome Aunt Helen takes it on herself to set the record straight. When she nags Pearl to reveal her illness, Pearl protests that she does not want to worry her mother.

"This is her right to worry," says Aunt Helen. "She
is your mother.""But she shouldn't have to worry about something
that isn't really a problem.""That's why you should tell her now. No more problem
after that.""But then she'll wonder why we kept this a secret
from her. She'll think it's worse than it is.""Maybe she has some secrets too." She smiles, then
laughs at what must be a private joke. "Your mother,
oh yes, plenty of secrets!"

Winnie does have plenty of secrets, and revealing them takes most of the book. While both mother and daughter learn to share what has been locked deep inside, this is really Winnie's story. She tells of the turns of fate she suffered in a China that was attempting to modernize but was still fundamentally feudal and often brutal to women.

First Winnie (Weili in her other life) conjures up the romantic memory of her own mother, the first of the moderns of Chinese society to have unbound feet. "When my mother was eight years old," Winnie recalls, "her feet were already unbound, and some people say that's why she ran wild." Her mother received an education, which some later called "bad." But Winnie says, "If you were to ask me, what happened to my mother was not a bad education but bad fate. Her education only made her unhappy thinking about it□that no matter how much she changed her life, she could not change the world that surrounded her."

Her bad fate was to fall in love with one man but be forced to marry another. Then one day she mysteriously disappears, and her young daughter is dispatched to be raised by relatives on a remote island. Weili grows up dreaming for her disgraced fate to change. When she gets matched to the dashing young Wen Fu, a man from a well-to-do family, she believes that it has. But as soon as she is married, her in-laws make off with her immense dowry, and her groom turns out to be a selfish brute whose behavior gets progressively worse.

As one of the first pilots for the Chinese Air Force, Wen Fu is transferred from training camp to military base and finally to Kunming, the Kuomingtang stronghold towards the end of the war. Weili naturally moved with him, trying to maintain the semblance of home, preparing special meals and treats purchased with the dowry money that was, fortunately, banked in her own name.

In such ways Weili and her friend Hulan, both alternately foolish and valiant, seek happiness even as the world around them is collapsing. Tan captures beautifully this helter-skelter period in China, when many lived on the run, never knowing how long they would be in one place□or one piece, as the Japanese battered cities with aerial raids.

It seems that Weili endures one humiliation, only to have greater sorrow come to crush her. She is physically beaten, her babies die, and more, much more. Yet this woman grows less foolish, more resilient, until she finds the courage to grasp her own happiness.

The ending, with its extraordinary convergence of all that has gone on before, is a marvel.

At a recent appearance in Washington, D.C., Amy Tan said, "I always find that it's necessary to write with some reader in mind, and for me, that someone is always my mother." In a haunting way, she has also successfully taken on her mother's voice in *The Kitchen God's Wife*□or, at least, the voice of someone of her mother's generation who lived through the tumultuous period of history her mother did. In addition to this remarkable mediumship, Tan displays superb storytelling□spinning personae and situations that are credible and compelling. But more, she has the courage to share heartfelt sorrow and grief, to acknowledge human imperfection and fate's ambiguities. Tan shows us that a life can encompass all that□grief, imperfection, ambiguity□and still add up to triumph, a triumph of the spirit, of the human soul to endure, to show compassion, and to hold fast to dreams.

Source: Scarlet Cheng, "Amy Tan Redux," in *Belles Lettres,* Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 1991, pp. 15, 19.

Adaptations

Audio adaptations have been made by Dove Entertainment (abridged and unabridged), in 1991 and (with *The Joy Luck Club*) 1998.

Topics for Further Study

Winnie Louie's life in China was difficult and tumultuous. Research China in the 1940s with special attention to political events. Pretend you are a simple villager and write a two-week diary in which you make the decision either to stay in China or to leave before the Communists claim power.

Study Chinese visual arts and prepare an overview of how they did and did not change over the course of the twentieth century. Given the historical context, try to account for the changes as well as the adherence to tradition.

Review Chinese religious belief systems and consider how they would respond to one of the following modern-day issues: genetic manipulation, space exploration, or racial tensions. Write an essay in which you present three different possible responses to one of these issues, based on what you have learned about Chinese religions.

The role of women in China has changed since the events of Winnie Louie's life. Hold a debate on the following topic: During the twentieth century, women's roles in the United States changed in much the same manner as women's roles in China changed, and women's rise in status in the two countries is comparable.

Provide three compelling and well-supported reasons why Japan was determined to claim Chinese land in the 1930s and 1940s. Consider areas such as military strategy, imperialism, resources, and the historical relationship between the two nations.

The Kitchen God's Wife is a novel of conflict□ interpersonal conflict, international conflict, and intergenerational conflict. Draw five examples of conflict from the novel and determine what you believe the root cause to be in each case. Can you think of possible ways to resolve any or all of these conflicts, or are they unable to be resolved?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: In China, marriage is arranged to provide the husband's family with the most wealthy or powerful relations possible. Often, either the couple has never met or they have known each other for only a short time. The woman has no say and is expected to comply with her father's wishes regarding her groom. Once married, she and her children became subordinates to her husband. Divorce is extremely rare because both parties have to agree to it.

Today: In America, marriage is entered willingly by both parties. Generally, men and women take time to get to know each other before deciding to get married, and the decision rests solely with the bride and groom. Marriage is often egalitarian, with both people involved equally and both people voicing opinions, ideas, and needs. Divorce is extremely common.

1930s: In China, the bond between a mother and daughter is considered sacred and unbreakable even if the relationship is strained. The clan and family mentality shapes adult relationships.

Today: In America, the bond between a mother and her adult daughter is sometimes cherished and nurtured and sometimes non-existent. While many mothers and daughters enjoy the changing nature of their relationship and come to enjoy each other's company as adults, the individualism of American culture often leads to distant relationships among family members.

1930s: In China, the political climate is threatening and unstable. Conflicts emerge from within and without. People live in fear and uncertainty.

Today: In America, the political climate is stable. There are regular elections in which citizens have the opportunity to make choices about their governments, and political parties have a formal process for seeking power. Still, low voter turnout is a consistent source of disappointment to candidates and party leaders.

What Do I Read Next?

Patricia P. Chu's *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America (New Americanists),* (2000) explores the increasingly important role of Asian authors in America and the ways in which they employ traditionally Western techniques to tell their stories. Chu also examines the ways in which female authors differ from male authors.

Typical American, Gish Jen's 1991 novel, relates the story of three Chinese immigrants who make new lives for themselves in America. They soon find that their beliefs, values, and expectations change as they become immersed in their new culture.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) is considered a precursor to Tan's fiction. It is an intense and bitter story of a Chinese-American girl growing up in California, caught between the world of Caucasian "ghosts" and her mother's "talk-stories" about China.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) presents the lives of four Chinese women living in America who recall their troubled and dramatic lives in their native land. Because of their altogether different life experiences, the women's daughters have difficulty relating to them. This novel was made into a successful movie in 1993 by Hollywood Pictures.

Ben Fong-Torres' *The Rice Room: Growing Up Chinese-American From Number Two Son to Rock'N'Roll* (1994) is the author's account of growing up Chinese American. Although expected to adhere to his Chinese heritage, Fong- Torres wanted nothing more than to assimilate into American culture.

Anzia Yezierska's novel *Bread Givers: A Struggle between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New World* (1925) is the story of Sara Smolinksy, a young Jewish girl struggling to free herself of the traditional expectations of women in Orthodox Jewish society. When she sees her father, a rabbi, marry her sisters into unhappy marriages, she runs away to make a new life for herself.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Amy Tan,* Chelsea House, 2000.

Respected literary critic, Harold Bloom, provides an overview of Tan's life and her work in and impact on contemporary American literature.

Ching, Julia, *Chinese Religions,* Orbis Books, 1993.

Ching presents the history and development of Chinese religious thought in three parts: indigenous religions, foreign religions, and syncretism. The author presents insightful comparisons rather than a cursory handling of each belief system.

Fitzgerald, Penelope, "Luck Dispensers," in *London Review of Books,* Vol. 13, No. 13, July 11, 1991, p. 19.

In this review of Tan's novel, Fitzgerald discusses the story of the Kitchen God's wife and states that the book's strength comes from its depiction of the attitudes of the older Chinese-American generation.

Huntley, E. D., *Amy Tan: A Critical Companion,* Greenwood Press, 1998.

Huntley discusses *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God's Wife,* and *The Hundred Secret Senses,* commenting on Tan's expert use of setting, themes, plot structure, characterization, and literary techniques. This book is written by a literary scholar specifically for the high school English student.

Tung, May Pao-May, *Chinese Americans and Their Immigrant Parents: Conflict, Identity, and Values,* Haworth Press, 2000.

This book presents an analytical view of the struggles between Chinese Americans, who are profoundly affected by American culture, and their Chinese parents, who are shaped by their Chinese heritage.

Wong, Shawn, *Asian American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology (HarperCollins Literary Mosaic),* Addison-Wesley, 1995.

Wong offers a compilation of Asian-American literature divided into sections of Memoirs and Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama.

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Dew, Robb Forman, "Pangs of an Abandoned Child," in *New York Times Book Review,* June 16, 1991, p. 9.

Durrant, Sabine, Review of *The Kitchen God's Wife,* in *Times* (London), July 11, 1991, p. 16.

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Gillespie, Elgy, "Amy, Angst, and the Second Novel," in *San Francisco Review of Books,* Vol. 16, No. 1, Summer 1991, pp. 33-34.

Iyer, Pico, "Fresh Voices above the Noisy Din: New Works by Four Chinese-American Writers Splendidly Illustrate the Frustrations, Humor, and Eternal Wonder of the Immigrant's Life," in *Time,* June 3, 1991, p. 67.

Law-Yone, Wendy, Review of *The Kitchen God's Wife,* in *Washington Post Book World,* June 16, 1991, pp. 1-2.

Lehmann-Haupt, Christopher, "Books of the Times: Mother and Daughter, Each with Her Secret," in *New York Times Book Review,* June 20, 1991.

Solomon, Charles, Review of *The Kitchen God's Wife,* in *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* July 5, 1992, p. 10.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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