Two Kinds Study Guide

Two Kinds by Amy Tan

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Introduction

"Two Kinds" is the last story in the second of four sections of Amy Tan's immensely successful first book, *The Joy Luck Club.* Tan intended the book to be read as a loose collection of interrelated stories, but it is often referred to as a novel. Several of the stories appeared in periodicals separately, many of them in *, which purchased the serial rights to the book prior to its publication. "Two Kinds" was initially published in the Atlantic in February 1989, one month before the book was released.*

Like all the stories in the book, "Two Kinds" is concerned with the complex relationships between mothers and daughters. In particular, Tan's subject is the distance between mothers who were born in China before the communist revolution and thus have been cut off from their native culture for decades, and their American born daughters who must negotiate the twin burdens of their Chinese ancestry and American expectations for success.

In this story, the narrator, Jing-mei, resists her overbearing mother's desire to make her into a musical prodigy in order to compete with one of her friend's daughters. The narrator recalls these events after a period of more than twenty years and still struggles to understand her mother's motivations.

"Two Kinds" contains all the elements that won Tan the well-deserved praise she received for her first book. It shows off her keen ear for the fractured English of the older generation (Tan was trained as a linguist, after all), and her sharp eye for detail in recreating the domestic scenery of mothers and daughters, especially in her descriptions of food and clothing.

Author Biography

Amy Tan was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, to Daisy and John Tan. Her Chinese name, An-mei, means "Blessing from America," and she is the only daughter in the Tan family. Her parents' experiences as immigrants became the basis of her fiction.

When her father and her older brother died of brain tumors within eight months of each other, Tan's world changed. Her mother returned to her old Chinese beliefs and religious practices and became convinced that the family's house in Santa Clara was cursed. Consequently, she packed up her remaining son and daughter and took them on a rambling tour of the East Coast and Europe. Eventually they settled in Montreux, where Amy attended and graduated from high school.

A rebellious teenager, Tan chafed at her mother's insistence that she attend a conservative Baptist college in Oregon and she quickly transferred to San Jose City College and then to San Jose State. She further disappointed her mother by changing her major from pre-med to English and linguistics.

By this time, she was married to a tax lawyer and drifting toward a doctoral degree when she decided to pursue other interests. After a couple of false starts she found considerable success as a freelance business writer.

After a period of introspection and a new interest in her mother's life and stories from China, Tan began writing fiction. She found support in a San Francisco writer's group and found an agent after publishing only one story. Her first book, *The Joy Luck Club* , of which "Two Kinds" is a part, was an astonishing success, and is often credited with sparking the public's interest in Asian American literature. Since then she has written two more novels, two, children's books, and several essays. She lives and works in San Francisco, where she still meets regularly with her writing group.

Plot Summary

In the story "Two Kinds," the narrator is a Chinese American girl who is locked in a struggle over her identity with her Chinese immigrant mother, who believes "that you could be anything you wanted to be in America." This particular struggle invokes the mother's attempt to mold her daughter, Jingmei, into a musical prodigy so that she will be able to brag to her friend Lindo Jong, whose daughter is a precocious chess champion.

The idea for piano lessons comes from television and popular magazines. The narrator and her mother watch Shirley Temple movies and try to imagine her as a child star. They even go so far as to get her hair styled to make her look like the blond, curly-haired Temple. The mother also reads countless "stories about remarkable children" in the magazines she brings home from people whose houses she cleans.

The mother's vague ambitions for her daughter take shape one night when they are both watching the Ed Sullivan Show (a long-running and popular variety show in the 1960s). There they see "a little Chinese girl, about nine years old, with a Peter Pan haircut," playing a piano solo in a fluffy white dress.

Sure enough, just three days after the watching the show, the narrator's mother has already arranged to trade housecleaning for piano lessons with Mr. Chong, the retired piano teacher in the building. A fierce struggle ensues between the mother's desire to make her daughter into a prodigy (more to satisfy her own ego), and the daughter's resistance to her mother's efforts to make her into someone she is not.

The narrator's strategy is one of quiet and passive resistance. She lies about her practice time and does only what she has to do during her lessons. Subsequently, her mother has no idea how poor and undisciplined a musician she is. At her piano recital, her awful, unpracticed playing embarrasses herself as well as her mother.

Much to the Jing-mei's shock, however, her mother insists that the piano lessons continue. With her mother literally dragging her to the bench to practice, the narrator says that she wishes she weren't her mother's daughter, that she wishes she had been one of the babies her mother abandoned long ago in China.

Such a cruel and hurtful statement silences her mother and ends the piano lessons for good. Many years later, the mother offers to give the piano to her daughter, now in her thirties, who interprets it as a kind of peace offering, though she still does not fully understand her mother's motivations.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Jing-Mei Woo's mother arrives in the United States in 1949 after losing her entire family including her first husband, their infant twin daughters, and her parents. Once she settles in America, she never looks back. She thinks that if you live in America, you can do and be anything you want. Not only can you open your own business, but you can buy a house and become rich.

When Jing-Mei is nine years old, her mother tells her that she can become a child prodigy. Initially, Jing-Mei's mother struggles to determine the type of prodigy her daughter can become. She attempts to transform Jing-Mei into a Chinese Shirley Temple. To accomplish this, she makes her daughter watch old movies and takes her to a beauty salon to get sausage curls. Instead of curls, the girl ends up with crinkly black frizz and has to have the hair cut off.

At first, Jing-Mei is just as excited as her mother about becoming a famous child prodigy. She imagines herself as Cinderella or a ballerina. She thinks that she will be perfect and her parents will adore her. Every night, she sits at the kitchen table while her mother shows her magazine articles about remarkable children. One story is about a three-year-old boy who knows all of the state capitals and the capitals of most European countries. Her mother tries to quiz her on capitals, but Jing-Mei doesn't know the answers. Her mother also tries to get her to do card tricks, stand on her head, predict the temperature in major cities, and remember passages from the bible.

After a while, Jing-Mei begins to hate seeing her mother's disappointment when she can not produce prodigy-like results. One night, while looking in the mirror, she sees her own ordinary face and starts to cry. As she cries, she sees something that she has never seen before: her face looks strong and defiant. At that moment, she decides she will never let her mother change her. From this point on, she becomes listless when her mother gives her the tests. Out of boredom, she starts to count the bellows of the foghorn in the bay. Instead of answering her mother's questions, she makes a game of counting the number of bellows she hears before her mother gives up.

A few months later, Jing-Mei's mother is watching *The Ed Sullivan Show* on television. She is surprised to see a little Chinese girl who is dressed like Shirley Temple and playing the piano. Jing-Mei is relieved because she knows that her family cannot afford a piano and a lot of sheet music. When her mother criticizes the little girl's abilities, Jing-Mei defends her, thinking that it won't affect her situation. Three days later, her mother tells Jing-Mei that she has signed her up for piano lessons and piano practice. A downstairs neighbor, Mr. Chong, has agreed to let her play the piano every day for two hours. In exchange, her mother will clean his apartment. When Jing-Mei hears the news, she feels as if she has been sent to hell. She screams at her mother, "Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm *not* a genius!" Her mother slaps her and says she is not

asking Jing-Mei to be a genius. She only wants her to do her best. She then calls the girl ungrateful.

Jing-Mei secretly calls Mr. Chong "Old Chong" because of his decrepit appearance, but isn't sure how old he really is since he is not married and still lives with his mother. Jing-Mei has only met his mother once and says that was enough because the old woman smelled like a dirty baby and her fingers felt dead. Jing-Mei is surprised to learn that Old Chong is a retired music teacher, and doesn't teach anymore because he is deaf. During their lessons, he points to places in her book and shouts out commands. Then he tells her to repeat after him and plays a complicated piece of music. Jing-Mei starts by playing scales and then pounds out nonsense. Old Chong applauds and tells her that she is doing well but needs to learn to keep time. Jing-Mei figures out that Old Chong's eyesight is too poor to catch the wrong notes that she is playing. Old Chong puts her through all kinds of exercises, but she quickly learns that if she keeps a steady pace, he will not be able to hear or see her mistakes. Jing-Mei suspects that she can become a good pianist, but she never gives herself the chance. Instead, she focuses all of her energy on trying not to learn.

She practices like this for a year, until one morning she hears her mother and her mother's friend, Lindo Jong, bragging about their children. Jing-Mei has known Auntie Lindo's daughter Waverly her whole life and thinks she is snotty. Waverly has gained some recognition as Chinatown's youngest chess champion. Jing-Mei hears Auntie Lindo saying that Waverly has brought home so many trophies that she must spend the whole day cleaning them. Jing-Mei's mother, not to be outdone, says that her daughter can do nothing but think of her music. She claims the girl has natural talent that can not be stopped. Jing-Mei decides that she is going to put an end to her mother's pride. A few weeks later, Old Chong and her mother sign her up for a talent show. Her parents have saved up enough money to buy a used piano. Jing-Mei is going to perform a simple Schumann piece that sounds more difficult to play than it actually is. While practicing, she never listens to what she is playing. Instead, she spends her time daydreaming and practicing the curtsy she will give after her performance.

Her parents invite all of the couples from the Joy Luck Club to see her play. When it is Jing-Mei's turn, she confidently takes the stage, sure that she really is a prodigy. She sees her parents, Auntie Lindo, and Waverly in the audience. She starts to play and is so involved in thinking about how beautiful she looks in her white dress that she doesn't worry about how she sounds. She is surprised when she hits the first wrong note. Then she makes one mistake after another, but she can't stop playing. She waits for her hands to get back on track, like a train, but she only produces a strange jumble of sounds. When she stands up, she thinks that perhaps no one has noticed her mistakes. She curtsies, but when she looks up, the only person who is clapping is deaf Old Chong. Her mother looks stricken. The audience finally applauds weakly. As she leaves the stage, trying not to cry, she hears a boy tell his mother that her performance was awful. Jing-Mei feels her parents' shame as they sit through the rest of the show. Although they could have left during the intermission, pride keeps her mother and father in their seats. After the show, the families gather around and Waverly tells Jing-Mei matter-of-factly that she is not a genius like she is. Waverly's comment makes her

angry, but her mother's expression devastates her. The woman wears a blank look as if she has lost something very important to her. When they get home, Jing-Mei expects her mother to yell at her, but her mother says nothing.

Jing-Mei assumes that she'll never have to play the piano again, but two days later her mother tells her when it is four o'clock and time to start practicing. Jing-Mei refuses to turn off the television. Several times, her mother warns her to get up. When the girl won't budge, she grabs Jing-Mei's arm and drags her to the piano. Jing-Mei sobs and says that her mother wants her to be something that she is not. She says that she will never be the type of daughter her mother wants. She screams that she wishes she had never been born and then, wanting to hurt her mother, screams that she wishes she was dead like her mother's first children.

"It was as if I had said the magic words, Alakazam! – and her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms when slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless."

Jing-Mei believes that she causes her mother many disappointments as the years go by. She doesn't get straight As, or get into Stanford, and she dropped out of college. Unlike her mother, she says she never believed she could be anything she wanted to be. She never asked her mother why her dreams were so big that they made failure certain. After their disagreement, her mother never mentioned the piano again. The lessons and practicing had stopped and piano remained untouched in the corner of the room.

When Jing-Mei is about to turn thirty, her mother offers to give her the piano for her birthday. Jing-Mei says that she probably can not play anymore, but her mother tells her that she picks things up quickly and still has natural talent. Jing-Mei denies her ability, but her mother insists that she could be a genius if she would only try. Jing-Mei doesn't take the piano. It is enough that her mother offered it. Not long afterwards, her mother dies. Jing-Mei hires a tuner to go to her parents' house and recondition the piano. She is surprised at how good it still sounds. She plays the Schumann piece that she had performed at the recital and it easily comes back to her. The song is called "Pleading Child." For the first time, she notices the piece next to it in the book is called "Perfectly Contented." She plays it without difficulty. After playing both pieces, she realizes that they are two halves of the same song.

Analysis

The author of "Two Kinds," Amy Tan tells the story in a first person narrative from the perspective of Jing-Mei. Jing-Mei is a Chinese-American adult who is reflecting on her life with her mother. The two have a complicated relationship and clash because of their conflicting desires. Jing-Mei starts the story by saying her mother believes that, in America, a person can be anything they want to be. Her mother had experienced tragic loss in China and, upon arriving in the United States, she thinks that with self-

determination, any goal is attainable. However, while her conviction is admirable, her ambition places a strain on the relationship with her daughter.

While Jing-Mei's mother firmly believes that anything is possible with perseverance, she does not see a distinction between her desires for her daughter and what the girl wants for herself. Instead of letting her daughter's abilities and interests develop naturally, Jing-Mei's mother pragmatically tries to discover hidden genius by putting the girl through a series of tests. The woman refuses to believe that Jing-Mei is not a prodigy because of her belief that a person can achieve great success through sheer force of will. If she can uncover Jing-Mei's talent, they will both benefit from the fame. Every time she sees stories about famous children, she tries to replicate their success with Jing-Mei.

Her mother pushes her so hard in so many different directions that the girl is never able to pursue her own interests and talents. At first Jing-Mei enjoys the nightly testing ritual, not because she wants to excel at the various skills, but because she likes the idea of being famous. However, soon Jing-Mei begins to feel that her mother is not trying to encourage her abilities as much as she is trying to make her into something that she is not. Her feeling that her mother doesn't love her for herself becomes the root of the problems between the two.

Jing-Mei rebels against her mother by deciding that she doesn't want to excel at anything. This is demonstrated in Jing-Mei's piano lessons. Again, her mother does not ask Jing-Mei if she would like to learn to play. She simply announces that she will start taking lessons every day for two hours. This makes Jing-Mei feels as though she has been sent to hell. However once she starts taking lessons, she finds that she does not hate playing the piano. In fact, she admits that she picks up the skill quickly and might have become good if she had tried. Unfortunately, she spends all of her practice time learning how to trick Mr. Chong into believing that she is playing. Had she put that energy into trying to learn to play, she might have turned into a decent pianist.

By pushing Jing-Mei too hard, her mother is never able to teach the girl the lesson she is so desperate to convey. Jing-Mei does not learn that hard work will lead to skill and success. Ironically, the girl ends up believing exactly the opposite. She spends the time when she should be practicing for the recital daydreaming about how she will look playing and how she will curtsy for the audience. She's come to believe that she will be able to do a good job without putting any effort into practicing. Up until the moment that she takes the stage and plays the wrong notes, she is convinced that she will perform well.

"Two Kinds" illustrates that parents can only help guide their children and encourage their interests. In the end, the child must decide what is important to them and what is worth working for. Jing-Mei's mother tries so hard to make her daughter a genius at something that instead she causes her daughter to seek mediocrity. Jing-Mei repeatedly says that she wants to be herself, yet she does not seem to have a clear sense of who she is. She is consumed with rebelling against her mother by not excelling. She cheats herself out of finding her own unique talents.

The climax of the story comes a few days after the recital, when Jing-Mei's mother tells her it is time to practice the piano. The two nearly come to blows when Jing-Mei refuses to play. Finally, in desperation, the girl says the only thing that she knows will break her mother's determination. She screams that she wishes she were dead like her mother's first babies. The words stun her mother. Jing-Mei wins the battle over the piano. She is never forced to play again. However, she says she disappoints her mother many times over the years. The two women do not end their struggle for control over Jing-Mei's life until she is nearly thirty. When her mother offers to give her the piano for her thirtieth birthday, she is showing her daughter that it is now her choice to play or not play, succeed or not succeed. The piano symbolizes all of the mother's hopes and dreams for Jing-Mei. She is now silently encouraging her daughter to take ownership of not only the piano, but of her own path in life.

Later, when Jing-Mei plays the piano, she is surprised to see how effortlessly it comes to her. Perhaps she was good at playing after all. During their fight after the recital, her mother had told her there were only "two kinds" of children: those who obeyed and those who follow their own minds. Now years later, she realizes that her songbook from the recital features two songs side by side. The title of the piece she played at the recital, "Pleading Child," symbolizes her pleading with her mother to let her be herself. The piece she now discovers, "Perfectly Contented," symbolizes her newly found peace. She realizes that the pieces are two halves that create a complete song. For the first time in her life, she is also complete. The pleading child has become perfectly contented.

Characters

Mr. Chong

Mr. Chong—also known as Old Chong—is Jing-mei's deaf and partially blind piano teacher. When she realizes that he can't hear the music, she stops trying to hit the right notes; when she sees that he can't read fast enough to follow the sheet music, she just keeps up the rhythm and he is pleased. At her disastrous recital he is the only one who cheers enthusiastically.

Father

The narrator's father makes only a token appearance in the story. He is not involved in the mother-daughter struggle over piano lessons. He does attend the recital; in fact, the narrator can't tell if he is horrified or silently amused at her performance.

Jing-mei

Jing-mei is a rebellious child caught between two cultures: the Chinese culture that prevails in her mother's home; and the American one that prevails everywhere else. She resists her mother's attempts at discipline and resents the pressures of high achievement that immigrant parents typically place on their children.

She also understands that her mother is using her to win a competition with her friend Lindo Jong; both women brag about whose daughter is more talented. She is resolved to be true to herself and not take part in such a competition. Refusing to practice the piano, she tells her mother that she wishes she were dead, like the babies she knows her mother was forced to abandon when she fled China. She regrets saying such hurtful things later.

Lindo Jong

Also called Auntie Lindo, she is married to Uncle Tin and is the mother of Waverly, the preco- cious chess prodigy who is the narrator's rival. Lindo goads the narrator's mother into bragging about her daughter's dubious musical talent.

Waverly Jong

"Chinatown's Littlest Chinese Chess Champion," Waverly Jong is Auntie Lindo's daughter. She and the narrator have grown-up together and have long been competing with one another.,/p>

Mother

The narrator's mother is a Chinese immigrant who wants her daughter to have the best of both worlds: Chinese tradition and American opportunity. Like many mothers, however, she has a tendency to try to make her daughter into her own image rather than allow her to develop into her own person.

The mother's hopes for her daughter's future belies her own tragic past, however. Like Tan's own mother, the mother in "Two Kinds" was forced to leave her three children behind when she fled an abusive marriage in her native China. By the end of the story, Jing-mei better understands her mother's sacrifices and motivations.

Old Chong

See Mr. Chong

Themes

American Dream

Anthropologists and other scholars who study the immigrant experience in America have long noted that the American dream exerts a powerful influence on new arrivals in the country. These scholars have also pointed out the burden of these dreams usually falls more heavily upon the shoulders of American-born children of immigrants.

Often immigrant parents are willing to sacrifice everything, including careers, family, and property, to pursue new lives in America. Realizing that they may not achieve the American dream of material success and social acceptance, they tend to transfer those ambitions to their children.

The narrator's mother in "Two Kinds," for example, insists that "you could be anything you wanted to be in America." She ticks off the possibilities to her daughter: "You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous."

While such pressures on the second-generation of immigrant families is common to all ethnic groups in America, the mother in "Two Kinds" and other Chinese American women of her generation were particularly interested in their daughters' success. The women of Jing-mei's (and Tan's) mother's generation grew up in rigidly patriarchal China and were expected to be subservient and silent even in America. Though they feared the effects of liberal American culture on their daughters, they also wished to live vicariously through them and pressured them to succeed in ways they could not have imagined.

As critic E. D. Huntley puts it, these "mothers have borne daughters, and invested in them all of the hopes and dreams that have propelled the older generation across an ocean to America. To give those daughters the best that the New World can offer the mothers have sacrificed their youth and their homeland."

The problem arises, however, when the daughters want to make choices of their own. As Huntley maintains, "the daughters see in their mothers not nurturing angels, only stern disciplinarians, domineering and possessive women who refuse to relinquish any maternal control."

Identity

When Jing-mei's mother says to her daughter in the opening paragraph of "Two Kinds," "you could be anything you wanted to be in America," she really means that her daughter could be anything her mother decided she could be. There are many aspects to the cultural and generational gap that separates Jing-mei from her mother (and the

other mothers and daughter in The Joy Luck Club), but the one featured in the story entitled "Two Kinds" is the question of identity.,/p>

For Jing-mei's mother identity is not problematic; even in California she identifies herself as a Chinese wife and mother. She also strives to maintain Chinese traditions and beliefs in her new culture. Her intersections with American cultural are transitory and superficial and do not require her to reconsider or reconfigure her identity.

Since most of her contact with American culture is through the popular media like magazines and television, she can be a passive and uncritical receptor of new ideas. It's not so simple for her daughter, however, who has to move across cultural boundaries and obstacles that her mother cannot begin to appreciate.

Writing about generational differences in *The Joy Luck Club* as a whole, Walter Shear observes that in each story "the focus is either on a mother, who figures out her world, or on the daughters, who seem caught in a sophisticated cultural trap, knowing possibilities rather than answers, puzzling over the realities that seem to be surrounding them and trying to find their place in an ambivalent world."

The mother-daughter struggle over identity in "Two Kinds" is less about who Jing-mei will turn out to be, prodigy or not, and more about their different beliefs about the nature and mechanisms of identity. Jing-mei's mother, for whom destiny and biology were synonymous with identity, believes fiercely but naively that she can invent her daughter's identity.

For Jing-mei, identity is not something put on or invented, it's something essential and individual. The mother and daughter have completely opposite understandings of identity and individuality, making their conflicts inevitable. As the narrator says later in the story, "Unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me."

Style

Memoir

All the stories in *The Joy Luck Club* are interlocking personal narratives in different voices. Because the narrators appear as characters in each other's stories, as well as tell their own stories, Tan does not have to fully develop the narrator's voice in each story. Nevertheless, the stories can stand alone, and "Two Kinds" was published separately; therefore it is possible to discuss the narrative technique utilized in the story.

In "Two Kinds" the perspective moves back and forth between the adult and the child. In this way, Tan tells the story through the child's innocent view and the adult's experienced eyes. This allows readers to make judgments of their own, to add their own interpretations of the mother-daughter struggle.

This literary device also invites readers to think about the way memory itself functions, how we use events in the past to help make sense of our present. Literary critic Ben Xu explains that "it is not just that we have 'images,' 'pictures,' and 'views' of ourselves in memory, but that we also have 'stories' and narratives to tell about the past which both shape and convey our sense of self. Our sense of what has happened to us is entailed not in actual happening but in meaningful happenings, and the meanings of our past experience . . . are constructs produced in much the same way that narrative is produced."

In other words memory is a two-way street; it shapes the story as much as the story makes the memory. In Xu's words, "memory is not just a narrative, even though it does have to take a narrative form; it is more importantly an experiential relation between the past and the present, projecting a future as well."

Talk Story

While American daughters like Jing-mei employ personal narrative as a way of telling stories, the Chinese mothers in Tan's stories find it more difficult to talk about themselves. The specific and innovative strategy that Tan uses to voice the moth er's experiences is borrowed from Chinese folk tradition, the talk story.

E. D. Huntley defines talk story as "a narrative strategy for those characters whose ties to Chinese tradition remain strong." It allows these characters to "draw on traditional oral forms to shape their stories and to disguise the urgency and seriousness with which they are attempting to transmit to their daughters the remnants of a culture that is fading even from their own lives."

This means that the mothers, "who have been socialized into silence for most of their lives," learn to "reconfigure the events of these lives into acceptable public utterances: painful experiences are recast in the language of folk tale; cautionary reminders

become gnomic phrases; real life takes on the contours of myth." Because this indirect means is the only way Jing-mei's mother can interpret and express her experiences, she is shocked into silence when her daughter speaks directly about the daughters she abandoned in China years earlier.

Historical Context

Chinese Immigration to America

San Francisco was (and still is) one of the largest Chinese American communities in the United States. When immigrant groups settle in one area and create extensive social and economic structures, these areas are called enclaves. By the time the mothers in *The Joy Luck Club* (and Tan's own parents) arrived in California, there was a large and thriving Chinese American enclave.

The first wave of Chinese immigrants to the United States occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Until the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was designed to limit the numbers of Chinese entering the country and prevented those already here from becoming citizens, as many as 30,000 a year arrived in the United States from mainland China.

These immigrants were almost exclusively male and "only the hardest, dirtiest, most menial jobs were open to them," according to social historian Thomas Sowell. They built most of the railroad across the Sierra and took on the dangerous jobs of strikebreakers in the mines. Nonetheless, they maintained strong social ties and were able to establish economic structures such as mutual aid societies and credit unions.

When the Chinese Exclusion act was finally repealed in 1943, more women arrived from China and the sex imbalance (and seedy reputation) of Chinatowns improved. The population of Chinese Americans began to rise and by 1950 it was higher than its earlier peak in 1890. These children, like Jing-mei in "Two Kinds" were often expected to make significant strides up the American social and economic ladder.

Although they escaped the anti-Chinese laws and overt prejudice that faced earlier generations, they still encountered a whole range of difficulties associated with biculturalism: "cultural dislocation; the problems and challenges of integrating two cultures; intergenerational struggles within immigrant families; the conflict between acculturation and adherence to an ancestral tradition, and between assimilation and parochialism," in Huntley's words.

Asian American Literature

The conflicts and tensions associated with biculturalism are a recurring theme of Asian American literature. Tan's unique contribution to the literature is the articulation of the Chinese American woman's voice. Critics and social historians have noted that Chinese women are acculturated to silence and are unlikely to speak or write publicly about private experience.

Chinese American women writers, in Huntley's estimation, "have been largely but inadvertently responsible for the new and sudden popularity of Asian American writing, a

development made even more startling because Chinese woman were an almost invisible minority in American society until the early 1950s."

Following the lead of Maxine Hong Kingston, Tan developed literary and narrative techniques like the use of the talk story that allowed the individual experiences of the older generation of women to be expressed in mythic and symbolic terms. Tan's other major contribution to the genre is the use of many narrators in a single text, a device that Hong Kingston had already introduced American readers to in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts.*

Despite her identification with other Asian American writers and the subject matter of her work, Tan is reluctant to be seen as a writer of ethnic American literature. In an interview in on-line magazine Salon, Tan explained her position. "Placing on writers the responsibility to represent a culture is an onerous burden. Someone who writes fiction is not necessarily writing a depiction of any generalized group, they're writing a very specific story." Nevertheless, the commercial and critical success of Tan's work is often credited with sparking a new interest among publishers and readers in Asian American writing.

Critical Overview

Early reviews of Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, often mistakenly called a novel, were generally positive. Writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, Orville Schell praises Tan's grasp of the Chinese American experience and says that Tan "has a wonderful eye for what is telling, a fine ear for dialog, a deep empathy for her subject matter and a guilelessly straightforward way of writing." The stories, he claims, "sing with a rare fidelity and beauty."

In a review in *Time* magazine, John Skow maintains that "the author writes with both inside and outside knowing, and her novel rings clearly, like a fine porcelain bowl."

Some reviewers were less impressed with Tan's narrative structure, however. Writing in New York magazine, Rhoda Koenig finds the book "lively and bright but not terribly deep," and notes that "some of the stories resolve themselves too neatly and cozily." She concedes, however, that "one cannot help being charmed . . . by the sharpness of the observation."

Similarly, Carole Angier in *New Statesman and Society* asserts that the book is "over-schematic," that "in the end it gives you indigestion, as if you've eaten too any Chinese fortune cookies, or read too many American Mother's Day cards."

In the decade since its publication, Tan's collection of stories has remained a critical and commercial success. Its popular success has helped open the doors of the publishing industry to other Asian American authors. Though it remains too soon to tell how literary history will assess the stories in *The Joy Luck Club*, the book has already received a great deal of attention in critical journals and has been the subject of numerous master's theses and doctoral dissertations in recent years.

E. D. Huntley contends that the "proliferation of scholarly examinations . . . points to the literary and cultural value of Tan's work." She goes on to assert that "Tan has already earned herself a berth in the canon of contemporary American literature," and that "Tan's novels have proven both their literary staying power as well as their broad appeal to a wide readership."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton teaches American literature and writing classes at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and she writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay she discusses power, matriarchy, and domestic space in "Two Kinds."

When Jing-mei's mother shouts at her daughter and demands her complete obedience toward the end of Tan's short story, "Two Kinds," she is defending her power over the only territory to which she can lay claim, the domestic sphere. Cut off from her native China by distance and political upheaval, yet distanced from surrounding American culture by language and other cultural barriers, the mother in the story makes a fortress of her home and uses it as a base of operations for deploying her matriarchal power over the life and destiny of her child.

Because her daughter has absorbed American ideas about individuality and self-determination, she has different expectations about gender and domestic space. In short, she is more likely to expect the household to be the site of nurturing instead of coercion, a place where her singularity is celebrated rather than bent to external standards of conformity.

The rise of the women's novel in nineteenth century American literature was accompanied by the idea of women's sphere. Though some used the notion of a specified female territory—both literal and figurative—as an argument for excluding woman from public life, many readers of popular women's literature eagerly embraced a world view that celebrated their domestic lives.

Domestic fiction did more than depict the lives of housewives, however, as feminist critics have pointed out; in fact, it helped carve out an autonomous realm where women could exert influence on their lives and on the lives of their loved ones.

Generally speaking, the form this influence took was the opposite of the means of influence that prevailed in the masculine sphere. Women's sphere was characterized by moderation, moral certainty, piety, and above all, nurturing. It was the duty of every woman to keep the pressures and vulgarities of the outside (masculine) world from crossing the threshold into the haven of the home.

This is the tradition of women's literature within and against which Tan places her stories of mothers and daughters. In "Two Kinds" the domestic space is most certainly in the mother's control. Her dominance over the space is so complete, in fact, that the narrator barely mentions that her father also lives there.

Unlike traditional domestic space in American literature, Jing-mei's mother uses her realm not as a refuge from the machinations of the larger world, but as a kind of home base from which to interpret that world and launch her attacks on it. She gathers

information assiduously, collecting magazines from other people's homes and studying them diligently, "searching for stories about remarkable children."

She also learns from television, and becomes fixated on the image of the little Chinese girl performing on the Ed Sullivan Show. The narrator describes how her mother "seemed entranced by the music, a frenzied little piano piece with a mesmerizing quality, which alternated between quick, playful passages and teasing, lilting ones."

In this image, Jing-mei's mother has found the ideal model for her daughter: exceptional but not unattainably remarkable. "Just like you," she says to her daughter, "Not the best." The difference between the girl on television and the girl in the living room watching television is merely effort. Jing-mei could be the girl on television if only she would try.

The mother exercises matriarchal power in the domestic space that she controls. But unlike traditional uses of domestic space in the American women's novel, the mother is not interested in excluding influences from the outside or public world. Unfortunately, since she lacks cultural fluency in American ways, she does not have the critical apparatus to evaluate or interpret the messages she receives. As a consequence, she accepts with neither skepticism nor cynicism that "you could be anything you wanted to be in America."

According to Jing-mei, her mother has a whole litany of things "you" could become in America. The "you," of course, refers to her daughter; the mother has no faith or interest in exploring new public identities for herself. Obsessed with infinite possibilities of improvement, the mother (and her reluctant daughter) "watch Shirley's [Temple] old movies on TV as though they were training films." Jing-mei confesses that in the beginning she was "just as excited" as her mother at the prospect of becoming a prodigy.

Yet soon the atmosphere in the domestic sphere becomes less nurturing and more coercive. The mother would "present tests" on multiplication, world capitals, and Bible passages. These kinds of objective measurements of a child's worth do not typically belong in women's sphere, where cooperation and sacrifice are privileged over competition and mastery.

Thus, the mother has wielded the only power she has, matriarchal authority largely derived from Chinese culture, in the only space she controls, the household. The problem is that in America the child cannot be contained in the household, the matriarchal authority is not absolute. Jing-mei soon begins to resist.

Because her mother's power within the domestic space is impossible to challenge directly, Jingmei discovers that passive resistance, or negative power, will thwart her mother's plans. After too many evenings trying to meet the challenges, she says: "[something] inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations."

Failure brings a new revelation as well, that she has the power to resist. She looks in the mirror and sees "what seemed to be the prodigy side of [her]." She is surprised to discover that " the girl looking back at [her] was angry, powerful." In an instant, Jing-mei devises a rudimentary strategy against her mother's coercive practices: "I had new thoughts, willful thoughts—or rather, thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be who I'm not."

For a while, the narrator thinks that her desultory and distracted performances on the tests have made her mother give up hope on making her into a prodigy. But then they see the Chinese girl playing piano on the Ed Sullivan Show. The mother forms a new plan and the daughter redoubles her efforts to resist it.

The mother's plan is to make her daughter into a musical prodigy so that she herself can compete with other women in her social world, specifically with Lindo Jong, whose daughter Waverly is "Chinatown's Littlest Chinese Chess Champion." Meanwhile, Jing-mei vows "not to be anybody different" and daydreams about "being somewhere else, about being someone else."

The mother's objective has less to do with securing her daughter's future than it does with her own desire for status within a matriarchal and domestic social structure of Chinese American women. Jing-mei is well aware of her mother's selfinterested motives and is "determined to put an end to her foolish pride."

Jing-mei's performance at the talent show certainly does end her mother's boasting about her superior musical abilities, but it also humiliates Jing-mei herself. Suddenly aware that the struggle over piano virtuosity had larger stakes than just thwarting her mother's wishes, Jing-mei feels like the "whole world" is watching as she embarrasses herself and her family. After the show she is "dev astated" by the look on her mother's face, "a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything."

Certainly the mother has lost her bid to compete with Lindo Jong and her attempt to raise her status in her world, but she is not ready to surrender all her authority yet. Just three days after the "talent-show fiasco" the mother tries to command Jing-mei to resume her piano practice. Emboldened by her ability to exercise negative power, the daughter refuses. She reasons to herself: "I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China." But the mother persists, asserting her will upon her daughter's body by dragging her to the piano bench.

As if her physical dominance were not enough to prove her authority over the domestic space, the mother makes a move toward appropriating the daughter's identity. By demanding total obedience, she erases her daughter's sense of self. For the Americanized Jing-mei, identity is not something destined or something achieved. It's not a *thing* at all. Jing-mei "did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be, I could only be me."

In other words, identity is synonymous with individuality—it's part of a person's singular essence. So when her mother tries to assert her power over her daughter's sense of

self, the daughter has only one defensive strategy left to her: to reject her matrilineal heritage altogether and to destabilize her mother's source of power by saying that she wishes she were not her daughter and by reminding her mother of the two children she abandoned in China years before.

The narrator reveals more than twenty years later that this incident did permanently alter the relationship between her and her mother. They "never talked about the disaster at the piano bench or [her] terrible declarations afterward." Yet the mother's power over domestic space, though diminished, is never completely overthrown. The mother's offer to give Jing-mei the piano for her thirtieth birthday is a gesture of forgiveness certainly, but it can also be seen as a colonizing gesture, a way of exporting her influence into her daughter's domestic space.

As an adult, and after her mother's death, Jingmei seems more open to her mother's influence and respectful of her matriarchal authority. By packing up her mother's Chinese silk dresses and hand-knit sweaters in bright colors and deciding to take them home with her, she assents to her mother's ongoing presence in her life and stakes a claim on the domestic space in her own world by letting her mother share it.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture with a specialization in American cinema from The University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer/editor and film critic and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the mother-daughter relationship in "Two Kinds."

The central struggle in Amy Tan's story "Two Kinds" is a battle of wills between the narrator, a young Chinese American girl, and her mother, a Chinese immigrant. "Two Kinds" is a coming-ofage story, in which the narrator, Jing-mei, struggles to forge her own sense of identity in the face of her strong-willed mother's dream that she become a "prodigy." Jing-mei is caught between her Chinese mother's traditional ideas about how to raise a daughter, and her own development as a Chinese American girl straddling two cultures.

Like many immigrants to the United States, Jing-mei's mother has created idealized visions of her adopted country as a land of opportunity where all dreams may be realized. The first line of the story introduces this central idea: "My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America." This vision of America as a place where the streets are paved with gold is further described in the opening paragraph:

You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous.

The tone of this opening paragraph introduces an element of irony in the narrator's attitude toward her mother's vision of America as a place where "you could become anything you wanted to be." Everything sounds too simple and too easily achieved. Yet the narrator does not paint a picture of her mother as ignorant or silly. The story indicates that America is a symbol of hope and optimism in the life of a woman who has suffered numerous tragedies in the form of great personal and financial loss, and yet refuses to give up her dreams:

America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.

Her mother's American dreams, then, function as a symbol of hope for a brighter future for her daughter.

Having absorbed idealized visions of the "American Dream" from television and other forms of mass media, Jing-mei's mother manages to fabricate a seemingly endless supply of success fantasies for her daughter. Each new inspiration about the nature of her daughter's destiny to become a "prodigy" is sparked by what she sees on television,

reads in women's magazines or reads about in such massmarket publications as *Ripley's Believe-it-or-Not.*

Her first attempt to turn Jing-mei into a "prodigy" is derived from television movies. "My mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple," explains the narrator. "We'd watch Shirley's old movies on TV as though they were training films." Later, her mother's determination to make her daughter a musical prodigy is inspired by a Chinese girl she sees performing on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

Through this process, Jing-mei's mother demands that she "try on" a variety of identities: from "Chinese Shirley Temple," to child genius, to piano virtuoso. Jing-mei at first absorbs her mother's dreams in which one may simply decide to be a prodigy, and then pick and choose which type of prodigy to be as if it were as easy as trying on clothes in a store or changing the TV channel.

I pictured the prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one on for size. I was a dainty ballerina girl standing by the curtains, waiting to hear the right music that would send me floating on my tiptoes. I was like the Christ child lifted out of the straw manger, crying with holy indignity. I was Cinderella stepping from her pumpkin carriage with sparkly cartoon music filling the air.

Yet Jing-mei soon finds that her mother's determination that she becomes a prodigy threatens to stifle her own sense of who she is. Ironically, it is out of defiance against her mother that she ultimately does forge her own sense of personal identity. Jing-mei's sense of failure to embody her mother's hopes and dreams is at first distressful to her: "I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations." When she looks in the mirror one night, she sees only her mother's vision of her as a failure and a disappointment:

I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back—and that it would always be this ordinary face—I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl!

The face Jing-mei first sees in the mirror is the face of who she is in her mother's eyes. "Trying to scratch out the face in the mirror" symbolizes her attempt to erase or obliterate her mother's image of her as a failure. Through this acknowledgment to herself that she is not the person her mother wants her to be, she begins to glimpse an image of her own definition of herself emerging from the mirror.

And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me—because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts.

Through this insight, Jing-mei for the first time articulates her determination to live by her own selfdefinition, rather than those ill-fitting "selves" her mother continues to impose upon her: "I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not." As the story progresses, Jing-mei becomes more and more openly defiant against her mother's wishes. One night, she bursts out at her mother:

"Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV for a million dollars!" I cried.

Later, when her mother insists that she continue to attend piano lessons, after she has made it clear that the piano is not her calling, Jing-mei further strengthens her resolve not to conform to her mother's wishes. This is also an important moment in the development of Jing-mei's *cultural* identity. For the first time, she articulates her resistance to her mother in terms of the cultural gap between her mother's traditional Chinese ideas about daughters being obedient and her own perspective as a strong-willed Chinese American girl.

And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one.

When her mother continues to insist that she attend her piano lesson, Jing-mei becomes openly defiant. Through this assertion of her own will against her mother's, Jing-mei strengthens her sense of personal identity in opposition to her mother. Jing-mei begins to sense the emergence of her true, inner self.

"No!" I said, and I now felt stronger, as if my true self had finally emerged. So this was what had been inside me all along.

With this moment of self-assertion, Jing-mei releases a floodgate of protest against her mother's attempts to mold her in the shape of her own hopes and dreams. Along with this, Jing-mei protests against the unwritten message her mother has given that she is not all right the way she is. "You want me to be someone I'm not!" I sobbed. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!" Her mother's response is expressive of her traditional Chinese ideas about mother-daughter relationships.

"Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"

She says this in Chinese, emphasizing that it is a perspective that comes from her Chinese background, and marking the cultural gap between Chinese immigrant mother and Chinese American daughter. For Jing-mei, defining herself in relationship with her mother is also a way of expressing her attitude as a child raised in America, a Chinese American daughter who follows her "own mind," not the "obedient" Chinese daughter her mother wants her to be.

"Then I wish I wasn't your daughter! I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted.

Jing-mei describes this release of anger toward her mother as a cathartic experience, in which she is relieved of the burden of her unexpressed anger toward her mother and her own negative feelings about herself.

It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

The "worms and toads and slimy things" crawling out from Jing-mei's chest symbolize the anger and other dark, negative feelings that have been penned up deep inside her until this moment.

Although this incident of confrontation between mother and daughter is never again mentioned directly, the older Jing-mei is able to reconcile these dichotomies in her sense of self when, twenty years later, after her mother's death, she is sorting through her mother's belongings.

Jing-mei first comes across items that she remembers in a negative light—symbolic of her mother's relentless habit of imposing upon her things she didn't like. "The sweaters she had knitted in yellow, pink, bright orange—all the colors I hated—I put those in moth-proof boxes."

However, Jing-mei stumbles upon some items from her mother's past in China that she ultimately values enough to keep. Her mother's old Chinese silk dresses come to symbolize a positive element of Jing-mei's Chinese heritage.

I found some old Chinese silk dresses, the kind with little slits up the sides. I rubbed the old silk against my skin, then wrapped them in tissue and decided to take them home with me.

In choosing to keep these items, Jing-mei symbolically chooses to maintain and preserve certain elements of her Chinese heritage, handed down through her mother. In sorting through her mother's things, Jing-mei symbolically maintains her indi vidual identity as she continues to reject certain things her mother tried to impose upon her (the sweaters), while seeing other items with new eyes (the silk dresses).

Jing-mei next comes upon the piano sheet music she had once refused to learn. As a child, she had failed to learn a song called "Pleading Child." This song title symbolically refers to her own position as a child, silently "pleading" with her mother not to force her into an identity not of her own choosing.

Yet, when she rediscovers this sheet music still on her mother's piano, she finds another title: "Perfectly Contented." This title suggests a sense of stability and happiness. Through playing both "Pleading Child" and "Perfectly Contented" again as an adult, Jing-mei reaches a sort of epiphany, or moment of insight and personal revelation.

In the closing line of the story, she finds that she "realized they were two halves of the same song." The idea of her negative associations with being a "pleading child" in youth are reconciled with the positive associations of being at least closer to a state of being "perfectly contented," refers to Jingmei's adult perspective that her childhood self and her grown-up self represent "two halves" of the same person, and "two halves" of the same identity— the Chinese and the American.

Likewise, the story's title, "Two Kinds," refers to the story's central concern with the mother and daughter as two different kinds of people, yet members of the same family, and the same cultural heritage.,/p>

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Kate Bernheimer received her M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Arizona and is the author of Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales (*Anchor Books, 1998). In this essay she discusses the mother- daughter bind and how it hinges on notions of abandonment and identity.*

"I wish I were dead," the protagonist and narrator of Amy Tan's "Two Kinds," the young Jing-mei, yells at her mother, watching her blow away in response like a leaf, "thin, brittle, lifeless." In this moment Jing-mei's empty battle for self has been won, though the victory is also a death, symbolized by her mother disappearance from the scene. The crisis between Jing-mei and her mother in Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" is grave and of a classic type of interest to psychoanalytic theorists: the peculiar love/hate entwinement between mother and daughter which hinges on ideas of identity and abandonment. In this story, the tug of war over Jing-mei's identity is essentially tragic; for either one to give in will mean a loss for both. Should Jing-mei bend to the fierce will of her mother and become something she feels she is not (prodigy), she must abandon her sense of her own unique identity, which is itself inchoate and unstable. Likewise, for Jing-mei's mother to give up on Jing-mei's potential, she believes she will enact abandonment, as she feels it her duty as a newly Americanized mother to mold Jing-mei to perfection, or leave Jing-mei for naught. This maternal drama is intensified since Jing-mei's mother herself harbors enormous guilt about abandonment, having lost two daughters already. By telling her mother she wishes she were dead like her sisters, Jing-mei defines herself as separate from her mother; she claims her identity, but she abandons her mother to the horrors of her past. In "Two Kinds" the psychic struggle of a daughter's separation from the mother in order to define herself is played out in a series of threats and losses.

Exploring the crisis in a daughter's identity, Tan offers Jing-mei, the stubborn yet insecure daughter of a peculiarly strong-willed mother. Defined largely by what she is not rather than by what is for her mother, Jing-mei remains nearly paralyzed for much of the story, incapable of acting in any direction at all. Trapped between her mother's trance of Jing-mei as the emerging, perfected American daughter, and her own muted and flawed sense of identity, Jing-mei can only sabotage herself and her mother's desires for her. The plot of the story, in which Jingmei fails to acquire musical ability, serves to dramatize the story's real drama: many kinds of abandonment, the result of Jing-mei's shaky identity. In her failure to achieve, Jing-mei abandons both herself and her mother. In refusing to become, she empties herself of all hope, she obliterates the hope of her strong-armed mother, and she forces her mother to abandon her as well.

Abandonment is not only a symbol for a mother- daughter crisis, however, in Tan's work. It has real historical value. Jing-mei's mother had two other daughters whom she had to abandon in Kweilin, China, during the Chinese Revolution. Set against that event, the mother-daughter tangle that comprises "Two Kinds" is intensified. The constant threat of abandonment remains intrinsic to the motherdaughter bond. According to prevailing psychoanalytic views, a daughter's growing sense of identity, of difference from the

mother, hinges on that exact threat. Neither Jing-mei nor her mother can get over such actual losses. Tan also presents this story as a reminder that the bond between mother and daughter transcends time, has a forever meaning. The identification of both characters with each other via the concept of abandonment further fuses them together, making their imminent separation even more harsh.

"Abandonment represents the insuperable trauma inflicted by the discovery—doubtless a precocious one and for that very reason impossible to work out—of the existence of a not-I," French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva writes, in an essay exploring the tenuous nature of the mother-daughter bind. "Two Kinds" finds Jing-mei at exactly this precocious juncture in her life, in which abandonment is not only represented by the existence of an other, but personified by it in the form of her two abandoned sisters. Both mother and daughter remain acutely aware of these phantom girls. This has an affect on Jing-mei's ability to have a sense of identity separate from her mother and her presumed- dead sisters. First, Jing-mei knows that her mother "lost everything in China." Yet if her mother lost "everything," that must make Jing-mei nothing. In fact she frequently tells herself she is nothing, will be nothing, nothing will become of her. On the other hand, sensitized to her mother's loss, Jing-mei is nevertheless too young to know that her mother will not similarly abandon her. That her mother "never looked back" does not bode well for a daughter who seems never to please a mother enough.

Earlier in the cycle of stories in which "Two Kinds" appears, Jing-mei states "I was not one of those babies" and, imagining her mother going to retrieve them, laments "now my mother's left me forever." Here one sees how intricately entwined Jing-mei's sense of identity is to her mother being present, loving her as much as the other daughters whom she lost, whom Jing-mei will never be. For Jing-mei, the two sisters in China are like a phantom limb, constantly reminding her of Kristeva's "not- I." This lack of identity is further fueled by an intense, almost primitive fear of her mother's potential abandonment. This fear echoes throughout the story and is expressed in Jing-mei's visceral response to her mother's attempts to sculpt her into something she is not. If she could become perfect, she muses, "my mother would adore me." If she is adored for something she is not — perfect — she will not be abandoned. However, this insecure child suffers from peculiar self-hatred. Knowing she is not perfect, and in fact thinking herself "ugly," she is fated to be left. For Jing-mei, a failure to be a beautiful prodigy will surely result in the loss of her mother's love. She designs exactly this occurrence, in fact.

The plot of the story, which follows Jing-mei's despondent incapability to please her mother, is a vehicle through which Tan represents Jing-mei's insecure notion of self, the story's true tragedy. A feeling of security, let alone perfection, continuously eludes Jing-mei largely because of her own refusal to try. Influenced by—but misunderstanding through exaggeration—the American notion of individualism Jing-mei believes she can only be herself. This concept, however, is of little use to this child of little identity, a girl who lives in fear of losing and who believes herself a failure from the start. As she only has a limited, and even negative sense of self, her self-image is a very unhappy one. At first she tries, but upon doing poorly at one of their early prodigy sessions, Jing-mei sees her "mother's disappointed face again," and states "something inside of me began

to die." Her sense of identity is so fragile that it cannot survive even this small abandonment of hope from her mother. "Maybe I never really gave myself a fair chance," she admits, but she is not so sure that is the case. She appears to believe that she can only deserve love for what she is; however, she defines herself only for what she is not. Therefore she will get no loves at all, she will lose the mother's affection. She is not the little Chinese girl on the television, she is not Shirley Temple (only resembles "Negro Chinese" her mother exclaims at a failed perm), she is not her chess-maniac cousin. Though Jing-mei's mother is indeed disappointed, she remains full of hope and desire. It is rather Jing-mei's disappointment in herself, her perception of the failure of identity, that Tan foregrounds most distinctly. The question that haunts Jing-mei most throughout the years is not why her mother was disappointed, but rather "Why had she given up hope?" It is Jing-mei's fragile identity, her fears, that this story is about.

Tan offers Jing-mei one small attempt at feeling better. Early in the story, at the start of the shortlived mother-daughter conspiracy to sculpt Jingmei's identity, Jing-mei looks in the mirror and at first sees a "sad, ugly girl." This enrages her. She proceeds to rage against the image, trying to "scratch out the face in the mirror." But after a moment something better shines through. Recognizing the power of a daughter's anger, Tan allows Jing-mei a moment of clarity that foreshadows the story's calming end. "This girl and I are the same," she thinks calmly. Here, Jing-mei expresses a nascent sense of identity, one full of power and rage, which separates her from her mother. Her mother, one scene earlier, had nearly lost hope. But here Jingmei recognizes that though she fears abandonment by her mother, she also desires such separation, because it frees her to be herself. Yet this strength and serenity cannot last. It is not strong enough to compete with the anxieties Jing-mei feels in the face of her mother's constantly dissipating pleasure in her daughter. "Why can't you like me the way I am," she soon plaintively asks. Finally, disavowing any hope of happy union in herself or with her mother, Jing-mei enacts a symbolic suicide of sorts: she stops trying to achieve. This represents that she stops trying to become. Jing-mei gives up hope of being loved by her mother, of having an identity they both can embrace. For her this is the equivalent of being dead.

This harrowing, precocious childhood realization has grave consequences for Jing-mei only alluded to in this story. Jing mei remarks that she eventually drops out of college, among other failures. Yet the story's true tragedy is contained within its obsession with the mother-daughter identity bind. In fact it is a double bind: the child Jing-mei cannot be what her mother wants and therefore, she decides, she must not be wanted. Likewise, as the child Jing-mei believes she can only be herself, and does not yet know who she is, she must therefore be nothing. This thwarts her development into a productive, self-defined adult. Projecting her anxieties onto her mother in youth, she ends up essentially blaming her mother all the way through early adulthood for her trauma (she states near the end of the story "I never found a way to ask her how *she had hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable*" [emphasis added]). Tan's fragile Jingmei floats a long time, identity-less, abandoned to her worries. Kristeva describes this as "the [girl] child's unstable identity," which when faced by the mother, gets "frozen within the drive of intensities that disturb it."

Only in her thirties, at story's conclusion, does Jing-mei realize that perhaps, the war over her selfdefinition was one contained largely within herself, that perhaps her mother had not in fact truly abandoned her. Receiving as a gift the piano on which she failed to prove her genius, Jing-mei finds the musical score for a piece she performed quite poorly at a recital. This horrible recital had been one of the nails in the coffin of her mother's desires for her greatness. The piece as she remembers it was called "Pleading Child." This is the child she remembers being—pleading with her mother to let her be herself, to leave her alone without abandoning her truly. Yet, turning the page, Jing-mei realizes the song has a second part, "Contented Child." She finds a sense of calm while playing it. The story ends with an eerie note of stability, Jing-mei finding melancholy pleasure in the recognition of "Two halves of the same song," or the song of herself. "I am large, I contain multitudes," the great American poet Walt Whitman wrote in his seminal tribute to American individualism, "Song of Myself." The piano is a gift from her mother, who has not left her after all. In playing the song, Jing-mei is embracing the two sides of herself. She finally leaves behind that selfish dread of losing her mother's love, which had kept her from being. "Identity," Kristeva writes, "emerges only at the end of this process when narcissistic shimmering draws to a close," that is, when one is able to recognize that "firm identity remains a fiction." In the end, Tan does not abandon Jing-mei to her daughterly fears.

Source: Kate Bernheimer, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Adaptations

"Two Kinds" is a part of the film version of *The Joy Luck Club.* Tan wrote the screenplay (with Ronald Bass) for this adaptation of her novel. The film was released in 1993 and directed by Wayne Wang. It was released on videocassette in 1994 and is available from Buena Vista Home Video.

"Two Kinds" also appears in the (abridged) audiocassette version of the book, available from Dove Books Audio and narrated by the author.

Topics for Further Study

What does Jing-mei expect will happen at the recital? Does she plan to give the kind of performance that she gives? Why or why not?

Why is the narrator's mother so fixated on making her daughter into some kind of prodigy? Besides the competition with Lindo Jong, what larger cultural forces may be encouraging her to think this way?

At the end of the story the narrator notices that the piece of music that she struggled with as a child ("Pleading Child") has a companion piece, "Contented Child." She realizes that they are "two halves of the same song." Explain how this can be understood as a metaphor for the story.

A recurring theme in Tan's work is the difficulty of assimilation into American society for many immigrants. Research your own family history and, if possible, gather stories from your family history. What problems did your family encounter as they assimilated into American culture? What traditions have survived the assimilation process?

What Do I Read Next?

The Woman Warrior (1976) is Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir of her bicultural childhood. Tan cites it as an influence on her fiction.

Another story that inspired Tan is Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). The novel chronicles the story of two Native American families.

Gus Lee's *China Boy* (1991) is a semi-autobiographical novel.

Further Study

Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982.

An influential and ground-breaking study, this remains an essential work in the field and provides an excellent introduction to major authors and critical issues.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) 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, SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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 SSfS 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

SSfS 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS 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 Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories 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 SSfS 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.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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 SSfS, 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 Short Stories 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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