The Woman Warrior Study Guide

The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston

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Introduction

The Woman Warrior experienced immediate success upon its publication in 1976. It became an instant bestseller and secured a place in the top ten nonfiction books of the decade. Because Maxine Hong Kingston deals with stories of growth in individuals and among generations in two different cultures, teachers from various disciplines utilize the book to supplement their instruction. Some use it to discuss women's topics, while others find it serves well to encourage and support dialogue regarding sociological, historical, literary, and ethnic issues. Critics praise Kingston's ability to deal with the concerns of identity formation in Chinese women who have long been oppressed by Chinese male tradition. In addition, her skill at story telling continues the Chinese art of "talk story" but advances the oral custom to a written treasure to be passed down through generations.

The Woman Warrior has also received negative reviews because critics find its content difficult to categorize. While Knopf published the book as nonfiction, many reviewers claim that Kingston includes too many nonspecific memories for the book to be considered anything but fiction. Kingston admits that the main sources of information for her books are her mother's tales and her father's reticence, along with her own memories and imagination. Kingston defends her technique, however. She says that the book is not specifically an autobiography but combines truth and fiction in an autobiographical form.

Whether readers love the book for its inspiring message about female empowerment or despise it for its sometimes cruel themes, most will agree with Pin-chia Feng, who wrote in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "Kingston's writing ... embodies the collective spirit of the Chinese American community."

Author Biography

Maxine "Ting Ting" Hong Kingston grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Stockton, California. Born in 1940 to Tom Hong and Brave Orchid, Kingston is the oldest of her parents' six American-born children. Kingston's parents serve as the primary sources for the imaginative stories she writes.

Kingston's father came to America as a scholar and teacher but made his early living in this country washing windows, and later, as part owner in a New York laundry. After losing his share of the business, Hong relocated in 1940 to Stockton, California, to manage an illegal gambling business. Brave Orchid, who had just joined her husband in America, accompanied him. Until World War II, Hong alternately ran gambling houses and suffered arrests for it. After the war, Hong opened his own laundry and provided a good life for his Chinese- American family. Hong told his daughter little about his life in China. The stories Kingston tells of her father have been pieced together from her mother's stories and her own memories.

Kingston's mother, on the other hand, was as vocal about life in China as her husband was quiet. Having managed to break free of the bonds that held her in the role of a traditional Chinese woman, Brave Orchid became a respected doctor, fighting the "ghosts" in her life and in others' lives. When she moved to America, she traded her doctor's role for one of laundry woman, cannery worker, maid, tomato picker, and mother. She would "talk stories" to her children at bedtime, offering tales of ghosts and family history as well as myths and legends. Her yarns provided her children with their connection to Chinese tradition and stimulated their imaginations. While her stories "warned" her children of the Chinese hatred for women, they also equipped them with knowledge of women who overcame the limits of traditionalism.

Plot Summary

No Name Woman

Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography begins with her mother telling her a story which she must never repeat about the aunt she never knew she had. In China the aunt had become pregnant long after her husband and brothers had celebrated their "hurry up" weddings and left for America. The weddings had been to ensure that all the men who went to America would come home and resume their places in Chinese society, but the aunt's adultery had disrupted that society. When the pregnancy became obvious, the enraged villagers had raided the family house, breaking and destroying their possessions as the aunt had broken and destroyed social order. That night, after the raid the aunt gave birth to her baby in a pigsty and then drowned herself and the child in the family well. The family never mentions her, pretending she was never born.

Unable to ask questions about the unmentionable aunt, Kingston speculates about her, trying to imagine what she might have been like and what might have motivated her actions. She wonders whether her aunt, a traditional Chinese woman accustomed to taking orders, was raped by one of the village men who then later joined in the raid on her home. She also wonders if her aunt, unable to seek adventure as her brothers had done by going to America, had crossed a different sort of boundary, looking for romance. She imagines the pain and isolation that her aunt must have endured giving birth to the child alone in the pigsty. Finally she realizes that her family has not mentioned her aunt not just to hide their shame but also to punish her aunt. Forgetting her aunt is the real punishment. Kingston realizes that she had unknowingly participated in this punishment, and she says that she feels her aunt haunting her now that she is the only one telling her story.

White Tigers

Kingston remembers the Chinese folktales her mother used to tell her about amazing warrior women who could battle whole armies and save their families. She particularly remembers the chant of Fa Mu Lan, and she slips into a fantasy in which she is Mu Lan. As Mu Lan she is a little girl who one day strays from her family's home while following a bird, and ends up in the mountains where she meets an old couple who takes her in and trains her to become a warrior. For fifteen years she stays with them and studies martial arts, meditation, and magic. Occasionally the old man shows her a magic drinking gourd in which she can see her family, and also the enemies that oppress them. In this gourd she sees her childhood lover marry her, even though she is not there for the ceremony. Finally she returns to her family and tells her elderly father that she will take his place in the war he has been drafted into. Before she goes, her parents carve words on her back which tell of all the wrongs done to them. Then Mu Lan dresses like a man and leads an army into battle. They win many battles, and for a time her husband joins her and they have a baby. Then he takes the baby back to his family while she returns to battle.

Finally her army beheads the emperor who has been oppressing them and appoints a peasant in his place.

Emerging from her fantasy, Kingston reflects on what a disappointment her American life has been. The good grades she earns in school do not seem as glorious as the deeds of the woman warrior, and they do nothing to stop the pain she feels when she hears her parents say that girls are worthless. She struggles with her mixed feelings about her Chinese culture and with her uncertainty about how to blend the two cultures of which she is a part. Ultimately she realizes that she, as a writer, has much in common with the woman warrior. What they have in common are the words at their backs. Telling her story is her way of avenging herself and her family.

Shaman

Shaman is largely about Kingston's mother. Kingston discusses how her mother, Brave Orchid, went to a medical college for women in China. Kingston's mother quickly became known among the other women as a brilliant student, but she made her greatest impression on the other students when she offered to spend a night in a haunted room. During the night she was visited by a "sitting ghost" which nearly smothered her, but she was too strong for the ghost, and in the morning she told the other students a fabulous tale about the event and then led them all in purging the room of the ghost. When Brave Orchid returned to her village, she became known as a great healer. In America, however, Brave Orchid cannot practice medicine and she sees all the Americans as ghosts. In the final section of this chapter, Kingston recalls her last visit to her parents. Brave Orchid, now an old woman, wants her children all at home and not wandering, but Kingston explains that she has found some places that are ghost-free and that she thinks she belongs there, where she is happier.

At the Western Palace

When she is sixty-eight years old, Brave Orchid finally manages to bring her sister, Moon Orchid, to America. Moon Orchid's husband has been in America for many years, but he has never sent for his wife or daughter. When Moon Orchid finally arrives, her daughter and Brave Orchid are there to meet her, but it soon becomes clear that Moon Orchid will not be able to make the transition to America easily. She is an old woman and unaccustomed to work, and she cannot do even the simplest of the tasks at the laundry. Finally Brave Orchid insists that Moon Orchid confront her husband.

They drive down to Los Angeles, where he is a doctor with a new, younger wife who knows nothing about Moon Orchid. They trick him into coming out to their car, but when he sees them he is furious. He will continue to give his wife money, but he will not acknowledge her. Brave Orchid returns home, but soon she hears that Moon Orchid, who has stayed with her daughter, is becoming paranoid. Brave Orchid asks her sister to come back to her home and tries to cure her, but her sister is going insane, imagining

that everyone she sees is planning to kill her. Finally Moon Orchid is committed to a mental asylum, where she seems happier, but where she finally dies.

A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe

Kingston tells how, when she was a baby, her mother cut her tongue so that she would not be tongue-tied, but Kingston thinks she cut too much because now she has a terrible time overcoming her shyness and talking. She realizes that silence has something to do with being a Chinese girl, as all the Chinese girls in school are quiet. Kingston grows to hate one particularly silent girl, seeing her as an embodiment of her own weakness and silence. One day she corners the girl in the bathroom and taunts her and tries, unsuccessfully, to force her to talk. Kingston comes to think that talking is what distinguishes crazy people from sane people. Crazy people are unable to explain themselves.

There are a number of crazy girls in her neighborhood, and she thinks perhaps every family must have one. She doesn't want to be the crazy one, but she also doesn't want to conform to the traditional Chinese roles she thinks her parents want to force on her. She doesn't want to be married off or sold as a slave if they go back to China. She finally confronts her mother and complains that her mother's stories confuse her, that she can't tell what is true and what is just a story. She ends by announcing that she is going to college and that her mother can't stop her from talking. Her mother, also a champion talker, responds and they end up yelling at each other.

Kingston ends the book by telling a story that her mother told her, but which she ends in her own way. Brave Orchid tells her how the family always attended the theater in China, which Kingston's grandmother believed would keep them safe from all danger. Kingston likes to think that in some of those performances they heard the songs of Ts'ai Yen, a Chinese poetess who was captured by the Barbarians and kept by them for many years. During all those years she was unable to communicate with her captors, until she heard them playing on their reed pipes and joined them, adding her mournful voice to their songs. When she was returned to her people she brought the song for the Barbarian reed pipe back with her, and it translated well.

No Name Woman

No Name Woman Summary

The novel opens with the narrator's mother telling her that her father had a sister. In 1924, the narrator's father and other men in his family, including his sister's husband, leave China for America. The narrator's aunt becomes pregnant even though her husband has been gone for years. The villagers raid their home the night the aunt's baby is due, and the aunt runs away, delivers the baby in the pigsty and throws herself and the baby down the well. The narrator comments that her mother likes to tell stories to warn her children about life. The narrator continues describing an invisible world of ghosts her mother tells of and the lack of separation between China and America.

The narrator continues pondering the story of her aunt and wonders where she would have met the man who fathered her child. The narrator questions whether she was perhaps raped. The aunt had been married to her husband the day before he left for America. The narrator wonders if her aunt had been forced to sit at the outcast table. The narrator's mother speaks of the aunt as though she was there, but the narrator knows that according to custom, both women would have lived with their in-laws and would not have lived in the same home. The aunt was the only girl in a family of five children.

The aunt's story begins taking on different possible tangents. Perhaps, the narrator considers, her aunt enjoyed the man she was with and was a wild woman who was preoccupied with her appearance. As a result, maybe many men looked at her lustfully. Another possibility is that the aunt was unusually beloved by her family for being a girl. The narration breaks with comments about the Chinese customs of talking loudly, walking erect, and remaining silent at the dinner table. The narrator knows that her aunt never said who the man was that impregnated her. Again, the narration breaks and the narrator comments on how she always adds the word "brother" to boys' names because she felt sisterly affection made sense over having unwanted attention from boys.

The aunt's story continues explaining that the aunt's supposed betrayal happened during a time of drought, ghost plagues and war with the Japanese. The village believes that the aunt's infidelity harms them, and the raid on the house is meant to curse her. The narrator retells the story of the aunt giving birth in the pigsty with more detail, describes her nursing her baby and comments that taking the baby to the well with her was actually an act of love.

The narrator is told by her mother never to tell anyone about her aunt and that her father does not want to hear of her. The narrator feels like she is participating in the punishment of her aunt by not speaking of her. In the twenty years since hearing the story, the narrator never mentions her aunt. The aunt's ghost will have suffered for all this time because she must fight for food. The aunt's ghost haunts the narrator; therefore, the narrator devotes pages to her. The narrator comments that the Chinese

are afraid of drowned ghosts because they are looking to pull someone down in the water to replace them.

No Name Woman Analysis

The opening pages of this book contain an introduction of the important themes of this novel. First, the role of women in Chinese culture will be examined. For example, in this opening part of the novel, the narrator's aunt is under scrutiny with the question of whether she was really an adulteress or a victim. Next, stories of ghosts, superstitions and traditions will be woven throughout the plot, and the thought of the aunt's ghost is just one of many she will think about. The narrator's mother is a very strong and influential character in the narrator's life. The mother is responsible for many of the stories the narrator hears, and she is always trying to determine which stories are true.

It is also important to note that although this novel reads very much like an autobiography, the reader never learns the true name of the narrator and cannot assume that the speaker is the author. The narration in this novel jumps from stories of the Chinese culture, to stories about other people, stories about the narrator as a child and as an adult, and even to stories that are made up or embellished. However, by the end of the novel we have a mostly complete understanding of the narrator's life, childhood, dreams, goals and heritage.

White Tigers

White Tigers Summary

The narrator tells of Chinese girls listening to stories that teach them they can be heroines and swordswomen. There is a story of a woman who invents white crane boxing when the spirit of a white crane, who later becomes an old man, guides her. The narrator's mother tells stories nightly, and the narrator reflects on the power in this. Although the narrator's mother tells her she will be a wife and mother, her stories tell she will have to be a warrior woman.

The narration turns into a fantastical story of the narrator as a seven-year-old girl who follows the call of a bird. The girl climbs up a mountain and finds a hut. An old man and old woman invite the girl to share a meal with them, and she spends the night. In the morning, the old man and woman ask the girl if she would like to stay with them for fifteen years so they can train her to become a warrior. The old man and woman show the girl an image in a water jug of her parents knowing why she has been taken away, and she agrees to stay with them to train.

The girl first has to learn to be quiet and kneel all day. Then, over the next five years, the girl exercises every day and becomes very strong. During the girls seventh year with the old man and woman, when she is fourteen, she is taken to the mountains of the white tigers. The girl has to survive barehanded, must journey through the mountains and eat very little for days. The girl describes thinking she sees the forms of white tigers beyond her campfire's light. The girl walks into a dead land that does not even have wood. She starts a fire with the sticks she is carrying, and a white rabbit appears and throws itself into the fire so the girl can eat it. Sitting by the fire, the girl sees the image of two people dancing and sees time spinning in the change of their dress. The two people turn into angels, and the girl recognizes them as the two old people who feed her. The girl tells the old people about the tigers stalking her and the rabbit. Then, the girl falls asleep. From then on, when the narrator glances at the old people she catches glimpses of their younger versions.

When they return to the hut, the girl is told it is time to begin her dragon lessons. The old man and woman tell the girl she can only see parts of the dragon at a time like catching glimpses of the mountains. The old man and woman show the girl sap from a tree that could allow her to live forever. However, the girl is told she is too young to choose immortality now. The girl is taught how to make her mind large enough to understand paradoxes. On New Year's the girl is allowed to look in the water gourd at her family. She is also shown all of the wicked men that she is supposed to execute when she is done training. When the girl begins menstruating, the old woman tells her that she must train even during those days.

One day, the girl looks in the water gourd to see her marriage to an old childhood playmate, and she is pleased. Men show up on the scene and tell the village that their

baron has volunteered one man from each family to join the army. The girl's husband and brother join. The girl wants to help her family, but the old man and woman tell her that she is still too young and is not ready yet. The old man and woman tell her that when she can point to the sky and have a sword appear she will be ready. Finally, the time arrives when the girl, now a young woman, is ready. She is given fifteen beads by the old people to use during extreme danger, and she returns to her village dressed in men's clothing.

Upon her arrival in the village, the young woman is welcomed like a son. The young woman's parents carve words into her back as a message for revenge, and take care of her until she heals. A white horse appears, which is a sign that it is time for the young woman to go, and she packs her stuff, dresses like a man again and prepares to leave. A man volunteers to join her army. As the two walk towards the palace of the emperor, the young woman's army grows. The young woman sings to her army at night, and they bring order to the places they overcome. The first enemy the young woman comes across is a giant, and she chops off his leg and head. The giant turns into a snake and slithers away. The young woman looks towards the mountains wondering if the old man and woman are watching her. While looking, the young woman notices the giant's wives crying and leaving.

The army continues moving northwards, and the emperor continues sending enemies in their direction. However, the young woman feels that Kuan Kung, the god of literature and war, is riding with her. The young woman never tells her army that she is female, for the Chinese execute women who try to hide themselves as men. At one point, the young woman's husband visits her in her tent, and she is happy finally to have a partner. The young woman becomes pregnant and begins looking fat underneath her men's clothing. The young woman only hides from battle once, and that is in order to give birth. The baby boy rides in a sling underneath her clothes, and they have a one-month ceremony to give the boy a name. The young woman tells her husband to take the baby to his family while he is too young to remember her. The young woman becomes lonely and careless, and one day she gets distracted by wildflowers and is caught by the enemy. The young woman fights with the enemy's leader, a prince, and he steals her bead pouch given to her by the old man and woman. The prince gets away from the young woman, and she begins chasing him but stops.

Eventually, the army makes it to Peiping where they behead the emperor and inaugurate a peasant. The young woman tells her army that they are free to go home, but she wants to see the Long Wall. The young woman also notes that she has never found her brother. The young woman finally heads home and confronts the baron of her village telling him that she is a female avenger. The baron begins mocking her for being a woman, and she takes off her shirt to reveal the carvings on her back from her parents. The young woman's breasts startle the baron, and she cuts off his head. The village puts the baron's family and servants on trial, and they behead those they find guilty. The young woman finds women with bound feet and sends them hobbling off with bags of rice. Legend later says that these women turn into a mercenary army that buys baby girls. The young woman goes to her husband's family and tells them that she can now work for them and have sons.

The plot returns to the narrator talking about her American life being a disappointment in comparison to the stories upon which she has been raised. When the narrator tells her mother about getting straight A's, her mother tells her about a girl who saves her village. However, in America the narrator cannot figure out what her village is. In addition, when the narrator hears negative comments and expressions about the role of girls in Chinese tradition, she throws temper tantrums. The narrator's Great Uncle would never let the girls go shopping with him, and at his funeral, she secretly feels good about his death. The narrator goes to Berkeley in the sixties, but despite her success cannot turn herself into a boy. The narrator feels like she has to turn herself into something that she calls American-feminine.

The narrator goes on to state that a Chinese word for female also means slave. The narrator refuses to cook and breaks dishes when washing them thinking that a bad girl is almost like being a boy. Even now, as an adult, the narrator does not feed people and allows dirty dishes to rot in the sink. The narrator says, "If I could not eat, perhaps I could make myself a warrior woman like the swordswoman who drives me." The narrator wants a bird or horse to call her away, and she comments that marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman. The narrator feels bitter that no one supports her, and comments that China binds her feet.

The narrator feels that businessmen are the enemy. The narrator talks about working at a paint shop where the owner called the paint nigger yellow. The narrator said she did not like that word, and the owner did not bother to respond. The narrator talks about working for a land developer's association where her boss chose a restaurant purposefully because it was being picketed by C.O.R.E. and the N.A.A.C.P. The narrator, refusing to type the invitations for the restaurant, is fired. The narrator realizes that it is not just racists she must fight, but also the Communists who took land away in China. The narrator imagines that she must also take back her family's laundries in New York and California.

With all of the fighting she must do, the narrator wonders if the spirits will protect her. Without magic and old people to guide her, the narrator decides that she cannot feel bad for not being as successful as a swordswoman. The narrator comments that she has looked for a bird to guide her. The narrator tells of the news from family in China being confusing. Uncles have been executed, and aunts, mother in laws and cousins have disappeared and they write from communes. The narrator's parents feel bad whether they send money to China or not. The narrator's fourth aunt and uncle had their store, house and lands taken in China. The family tried selling wood and yams, but the fourth uncle would not call out. The fourth aunt became angry with the uncle and left him sitting underneath a tree. Later, the Communists found him, killed him and left his body in the tree. The narrator is also confused that her family is not the poor for her to avenge, like the swordswoman of her fantasy, but rather they are treated more like the baron in her story even though they are not wealthy.

The narrator describes fighting often in junior high school, looking at dead slum people, and trying to find old people to be her gurus. Once, a medium tells the narrator she could be a medium, but she is not happy with this either. As an adult, the narrator has

moved away and lives among Chinese and Japanese who are not from her village. Sometimes the narrator feels that her American success is useless. Once, the narrator read in an anthropology book that the Chinese say that girls are necessary as well. However, the narrator has never heard a Chinese person say this. The section ends with the narrator stating that her and the swordswoman are not that different, and what they share in common are the words on their backs. The narrator goes on to say that the words of revenge also mean to report a crime. Finally, she says, "The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting but the words. And I have so many words – "chink" words and "gook" words too – that they do not fit on my skin."

White Tigers Analysis

This part of the novel contains a fantasy of a girl becoming a hero. This fantasy contains elements of a hero journey beginning with a magical bird taking the girl to the older people's home. These two characters play the role of mentors and invite the girl to be their student. The girls is trained and tested in the mountains where she learns the true, ancient and timeless forms of her guides. The girl's training is for the purpose of exacting revenge on the wicked men of the country. It is notable that this girl becomes married, has a child during her adventures, and her one time of weakness comes from being distracted when her child is taken away from her. After the woman's victory, she states that she will work for her husband's parents and have more sons. Even in this story, the girl's primary role is to be a wife and mother to boys.

The narrator notes that one word for girl in Chinese may also mean slave. The narrator is determined not to be one of these girls and does not clean or cook. The narrator wishes to become a warrior woman and describes her enemies as businessmen and the Communists. However, the narrator still feels as though she needs magic to help her. In comparison to her fantasy of being a warrior woman, the narrator does not feel like her American successes are useful or recognizable.

Mixed in with both the fantasy and the narrator's determination to be a woman warrior is important information about her family in China. Learning about the narrator's family losing land in China and what happens to their family under Communist rule will happen throughout the novel. The ending words of the chapter, "The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words – "chink" words and "gook" words too – that they do not fit on my skin," are an important clue as to the purpose of the narrator telling her story. The narrator's story is like a form of revenge, and in telling the story, or reporting, she truly becomes a woman warrior.

Shaman

Shaman Summary

The narrator's mother has a medical diploma from China, which was airmailed over in 1950 in a can. When the narrator opens the can, she claims that the smell of China flies out of it. Inside the can are three scrolls, which are stamped and signed by numerous officials. The narrator looks at a photo of her mother's graduating class and sees that she is thirty-seven even though her diploma says twenty-seven. The narrator feels that her mother looks younger than her, intelligent, alert, and pretty, but she cannot tell if her mother is happy. The narrator comments that emigrants learn to stare in America, and compares this formal picture to those of the laughing photos of her father in America. There are no snapshots of the narrator's mother, but she notices thumbprints on her mother's forehead in two small portraits and cannot figure out where they came from.

When the narrator's father did not return to China and it had been ten years since their first two children, a boy and a girl, died at the ages of three and two, the mother decided to become a doctor. The mother travels by herself on a ship and is assigned to a room with five other girls at the medical school. The narrator describes the pleasure each woman must have experienced in unpacking her belongings in her own space. These women live like this for two years. After unpacking, the women drink tea together and go to the auditorium to listen to speeches about what they will be learning.

At the school, there are two main places to study. First, there is the main dining hall where the women can chant their lessons aloud with others. Second, they can study privately tables in their own rooms. The narrator's mother prefers studying alone and earns a reputation for being brilliant. During exams, other women want to sit by her to peek at her paper. The mother does not consider this cheating, merely the girls getting a clue to help them. The mother also studies secretly, for she has to appear to be smarter than the girls she is supposedly ten years older than, and she is actually twenty years older than the others are.

There is a haunted room in the girl's dormitory, and the narrator comments about how her mother enjoys talking about supposedly true ghosts. One night, the girls are up talking when they hear a noise. The girls ask the mother to go look in the haunted room. The mother goes to the ghost room, but she does not notice anything unusual. A girl says that the hunting does not start until midnight. The narrator and her mother both have the dragon for their totem, which is supposed to make them brave and strong. Therefore, the mother volunteers to sleep in the haunted room and brings a knife and a novel. The mother tells the girls to tweak her ears and call her name to come home if they find her in the morning and she is very afraid.

The mother goes to the haunted room, lies on the bed and begins reading her novel aloud. The mother becomes alert when a new darkness enters the room, and she is described as having adventured the white mountains and this blackness is no different.

A rush comes from under the bed and a Sitting Ghost sits on top of the mother. The ghost is described as furry and hairy, and the mother tries to fight it off but becomes exhausted. The mother hears a high ringing coming from the ghost and realizes that the whole school is asleep. The mother speaks to the ghost about how she will win their battle, insults it and says that she will burn the ghost out. The mother begins reciting her lessons for the following day, and when dawn comes, the ghost hurries off her.

The mother finally sleeps, and when the students come into the room, she asks them to wiggle her earlobes and they begin calling her name to come back to the school. The mother is comforted and tells the girls of her night. The mother says she died for a while at three a.m., and for twelve years, she lost her way. The mother tells the girls about the disturbing high ringing. Next, the mother asks the girls to help her get rid of the ghost. All day long, the girls snatch alcohol and matches from the labs, and that afternoon they burn the room and smoke it out. When the girls are done, they find a bloody piece of wood under the bed and burn it. Burning the wood makes it smell like a corpse.

The narrator describes the women at the medical school as new women who were changing the rituals. When the narrator's mother was a child, one of her three mothers would hold her and chant the names of her ancestors and relatives to calm her. However, at the school, the ritual was done with the names of friends. The narrator wonders if this is why her mother loses her village and does not reach her husband for fifteen years. The narrator recalls always feeling love when her mother chants for her, and her mother tells the children about China all the time.

After two years at medical school, the mother returns to her village. The mother is well dressed, and the village people admire her. The mother comments that her status has fallen since coming to America. The mother delivers babies, sets broken bones and keeps her name of Brave Orchid. The narrator describes a quiet girl following her mother who could have been a daughter or slave, and the following story explains where this girl comes from.

Brave Orchid has money and goes to the shops. The mother buys a huge bag of seeds and a turtle for her father, which is supposed to lengthen his life. A fortuneteller tells Brave Orchid that she will have six more children, and she is very lucky because six is the number of the universe. The market is very crowded, and the mother decides to buy her slave from a professional. The mother looks at quiet, older girls and checks them for anemia. One girl has a particularly strong heart, and Brave Orchid says that if she can write a word from memory she will take her. The girl passes that test, and the mother asks the girl what she would do if she lost a gold watch in a field. The girl responds that she would say a chant for it. Next, the mother asks the girl about weaving, and the girl cannot correctly answer all of the questions. Brave Orchid tells the dealer that she wants the girl to be a weaver for her mother-in-law and acts dissatisfied. The dealer sells the mother the slave at her price, and later the mother tells the girl that she will be trained to be a nurse.

The narrator says that her mother's enthusiasm for the slave girl was always more than for her. The narrator also feels as though she can never live up to her older brother and

sister, and describes her mother getting angry with her for not bartering at department stores. The mother also bought a puppy in China to act as a bodyguard for her during night calls. The mother was considered a good doctor, and she refused to touch death. If she went to a house and found that there was no saving the person, she would tell them to find another doctor. The narrator asks how much the slave girl cost and the mother said it was fifty dollars. The mother compares the fifty dollars to the two hundred she had to pay for having the narrator.

The narrator says that while her mother was out doctoring, ghosts, were-people and apes would drop out of the trees. Once, a man who had traveled west had captured a half man-half ape creature. The man had kept the creature penned up, but he had escaped. At night, the mother realizes that she is being followed and she knows that the creature has been known to attack people. The mother sees the ape jump from a tree, and it hurts its foot. The mother runs after the creature with a club, and it runs away. The mother thinks about how her third mother is black, and visits the ape-man when he is recaptured. The mother wonders if he is a Tigerman, which is a savage northern race.

As a midwife, the mother says she has birthed babies and monsters. One boy appeared to be perfect, but he was born with blue eyes. The mother of this child thought that a ghost had gotten in him. One boy was born with no anus, and he was placed in the outhouse to die. The narrator as a child pictured a boy sitting on the toilet. The mother tells the narrator of the common practice of placing a baby girl's face in ashes to kill it when born. In America, couples thank the narrator's mother for making them soup to end infertility and bring a boy. The narrator says that she often dreams of trying to care for babies, but always hurts them in the dreams. The narrator is comforted to wake to her normal American life. The narrator says, "Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear."

At the family owned laundry, when the temperature reaches 111 degrees, the narrator's mother and father say it is time to tell ghost stories to cool off. The mother tells a story of crossing a bridge when she is confronted by two smoky columns that begin making the bridge move. The Great Uncle says that the ghost was called Sit Dom Keuie. When the Communists issue papers about how to fight ghosts, the narrator tries to find Sit Dom Keuie, but is unable to. The narrator claims that her mother can eat anything, and all heroes have to be strong when it comes to food. The narrator then tells several stories of heroes and their foods.

First, a hero named Karo Chung ate five cooked chickens and ten bottles of wine, and then he attacked a sea monster. Supposedly, this hero's sword is still on display. Chou Yi-han fried a ghost. Next, Chen Luan-feng ate yellow croaker and pork together even though the thunder god had forbidden it. This hero wanted thunderbolts to stop the drought. Wei-Pang, a scholar and hunter, ate scorpions, snakes and cockroaches. Wei-Pang slept in an abandoned house and shot three arrows at an invisible sphere, which turned into a ball of flesh with eyes. Wei-Pang and his servant each ate half of the ball. An anonymous eater ate frogs that appeared in his house for a month. Each night the frogs became smaller and smaller, but there were always more.

The narrator's mother has cooked raccoons, skunk and other animals before. The narrator recalls an owl diving down at her once. The narrator describes a bear claw her mother keeps stewing in a jar with alcohol and herbs. The mother brought this claw from China, and she rubs sprains and bruises with the herbs. The narrator's mother tells her about monkey feasts in China where they cut off a monkey's head and eat its brains. The mother claims that if food tastes good it is bad for a person. The narrator recalls eating four and five day old leftovers. The narrator states that her mother is a capable exorcist because she is able to eat everything.

The narration turns to the story of a crazy lady who was stoned by refugees in the mountains. The narrator's mother was living in the mountains with other refugees when China was at war with Japan. The Japanese are not considered ghost foreigners to the Chinese because they have a shared ancestry. The mother describes having to watch for planes flying in threes, for these would be the bombers. One peaceful summer afternoon, the crazy lady puts on a headdress with mirrors. The refugees think that she is trying to signal the planes, and the crazy lady says that she can make the sky rain fire. The narrator's mother tries to tell the refugees that the woman is just crazy, but they begin throwing rocks at her and she dies. The mother does not treat those who are about to die and walks away from the scene.

The narrator's mother leaves China in the winter of 1939 and arrives in America in January of 1940. When immigration asks the mother when her husband cut off his pigtail, she cannot remember. The narrator was born during the middle of World War II. The narrator recalls looking for airplanes and imagining them in her dreams. America is full of machines and ghosts to the Chinese family. The narrator lists taxi ghosts, police ghosts, white ghosts and black ghosts. The newsboy ghost is known for calling out and luring children to the gypsies who will boil them to make an ointment. Ghosts cannot hear or see well, and the family is very surprised when the garbage ghost repeats Chinese words back to the girls calling out at him. The mother always says that one day they will get back to China. When the children say their mouths taste like sugar, the mother says their grandmother is sending them candy from China. The narrator does not want to go to China where she is afraid her parents will sell her and her father will take many more wives. The narrator says that she is afraid of the size of the world.

When the narrator last visits her parents, she is unable to sleep. The mother comes into the room, and the narrator describes her white hair and comments that her own hair is white, too. The mother says that she has swallowed LSD, and the narrator tells her it was cold medicine. The mother says she cannot deal with her daughter leaving again, and the narrator describes how much her mother cleans the house. The narrator says that she will come back again, and her mother tells her that she, the narrator, is becoming old now even though it has only been a year since her last visit. Then, they talk about the mother's age, and the mother claims that she is eighty and that the papers are wrong. The narrator comments that her mother never calls her oldest daughter, but rather biggest daughter. The narrator asks about having a dead brother and sister, and the mother claims that they never existed.

The mother continues talking about working in the field picking tomatoes, and the narrator asks her why she does not quit. The family owned laundry has been torn down, and the father is not working anymore. The mother begins commenting on how people work their lives away here in America. The mother talks about how tiny she was in China, and now she is strong. The narrator suddenly recalls her mother burning candles in the laundry to try to kill the germs and protect the children. The mother continues on talking of how much slower time is in China for enjoying life and that in America time moves too fast. The narrator responds that time is the same everywhere.

The narrator learns that the villagers have written asking for the family land in China, and her father said yes because all of the uncles are now dead. The mother claims that the Communists in America are mischievous, and the narrator tells her that the new immigrants are fugitives from Communism. The mother responds with saying that regardless they are Chinese, and she is too old to keep up with them. The mother wants her children back home with her and her husband. The narrator suddenly gets a headache that she describes as a spider headache and claims that she feels responsibility for time and the ocean. The narrator tells her mother that when she is away she does not get sick, and she does not want to hear ghosts. The mother agrees that it is better for the narrator to stay away and calls the narrator Little Dog as a term of endearment to fool the gods. The chapter ends with the words, "She sends me on my way, working always and now old, dreaming the dreams about shrinking babies and a Chinatown bigger than the ones here."

Shaman Analysis

This part of the book is primarily dedicated to the narrator's mother and her background as a young doctor in China. The title of this chapter, "Shaman" is important because shamans are healers and spiritual guides. The experience of the narrator's mother at the medical school and with ghosts both tie in with this. We learn that Brave Orchid's diploma has her age off by ten years, and that she decides to go to the medical school after her husband has not returned from America and her first two children have been dead for ten years. The reader never learns much more about these two children. When the narrator is looking at her mother's picture, she notices that she looks young, intelligent and pretty.

The medical school is a place of freedom and newness for the women. When the women unpack their belongings, there is satisfaction in knowing that they have their own space. Brave Orchid works very hard at the school and appears to be brilliant, but in reality, she studies more than the other girls study and feels pressure to be smarter because she is older than they are. The narrator describes these women as forging new rituals, stemming from being apart from the traditional family and village setting, being instead at the new medical school. However, the scene with Brave Orchid battling the Sitting Ghost is certainly connected to the Chinese culture's belief in ghosts. In the setting of the new school, the girls are still worried about a haunted ghost. When Brave Orchid survives the situation and speaks of it, she describes having died and lost her

way. Again, this story ties in with the idea of a shaman, for shamans are said to be able to cross into the netherworld.

The story turns to Brave Orchid's status as a doctor. Brave Orchid is very admired by her village and is said to be a good doctor. The narrator comments that her mother's enthusiasm, for the slave girl she purchased and her first two children, is more than for her. There is also a description of Brave Orchid's work as a midwife and the different types of babies. The narrator is haunted by the idea of these babies, and especially of those left to die. This reminds the reader of the time during which the narrator's mother grew up, which was the pre-World War II era.

The narrator states that when the temperature at the family laundry is hot they tell ghost stories to cool themselves. Then, the narrator begins telling about heroes who have to be strong with food and describes the unusual variety of food her mother cooks. The narration breaks and tells of the crazy lady who gets stoned by the refugees in the mountains. All of these stories of China involve a mix of tradition, culture, storytelling, fantasy and some violence. The narrator states, "Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear. " Certainly all of these different stories confuse and yet help shape the narrator's young view of the world. Part of her development in this novel is about trying to make sense of the stories she has grown up with and her Chinese heritage. The narrator also describes how America is full of ghosts, or foreigners, to the Chinese family.

As an adult, the narrator visits her family, and her mother sneaks into her room at night. This scene contains important information about the mother who still misses China. The mother also expresses her wish to have her daughter and other children return home. The narrator feels responsible for her parents, yet she is resistant to returning. The narrator does not get sick at her own home and is happy to be away from the ghost stories. The ending words of the mother accepting that her daughter will not return home to live reveals a very important acceptance on her part. The mother is accepting the daughter for who she is. This fact is important because for the majority of the novel the narrator seeks her mother's approval. However, the ending words also suggest that the narrator cannot entirely leave behind the lessons and stories she has learned from her mother.

At the Western Palace

At the Western Palace Summary

The narrator's mother, who is now entirely referred to as Brave Orchid, is waiting at San Francisco International Airport for her sister Moon Orchid to arrive from China. Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid's daughter and two of Brave Orchid's children have been waiting for nine hours already. Moon Orchid's daughter is sitting with Brave Orchid, but her own children are out wandering around the airport. Brave Orchid notices soldiers and sailors sitting around calmly waiting for their flight to Vietnam. Brave Orchid believes one of her sons is in Vietnam, but her children tell her he is in Japan and the Philippines. Brave Orchid asks her niece about whether she has seen the postmarks on her son's letters. Brave Orchid believes her children would send his letters to the Philippines to be postmarked before she gets them. Brave Orchid tells her niece that her son cannot take orders or take care of himself.

Moon Orchid's plane lands early and Brave Orchid compares the plane trip to her rough boat trip to Ellis Island. Brave Orchid has a hard time recognizing Moon Orchid, and once even mistakes a young woman for her. The niece begins calling out when she sees her mother. Brave Orchid recognizes Moon Orchid once she sees the younger outline of her first. Brave Orchid is taken by surprise at how old Moon Orchid looks, and apparently, the same is true for Moon Orchid. The two women cannot stop looking at each other, commenting how old they both look even during the car ride home.

When they arrive home, Brave Orchid's husband is waiting outside, and Moon Orchid recognizes him and thinks to herself that her sister had married the ideal in masculine beauty. Moon Orchid also thinks the husband says hello like an Englishman in Hong Kong. Once inside, Moon Orchid begins unpacking presents and gifts she has brought from China. First, she has shoes from Lovely Orchid who is the youngest sister who owns a shoe store or factory in China. Next, Moon Orchid unpacks jewelry and a paper warrior saint that was cut by hand. The children are all impressed that this paper doll had been cut by hand, and Moon Orchid begins pulling out numerous other dolls including one of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior.

Brave Orchid breaks up rock candy and wants her children to eat it, for it is meant to symbolize a sweet beginning. Brave Orchid also wants to begin packing up the gifts again. Moon Orchid pulls out a beautiful dress for Brave Orchid. Moon Orchid notices that the family has pictures of themselves hanging up, and Brave Orchid explains that this is acceptable in America. Moon Orchid continues looking around the home. Eventually, the women cook dinner and the family sits down to eat.

After dinner, Brave Orchid states that it is time to get down to business, and she begins talking about Moon Orchid's husband. Moon Orchid has been receiving money from her husband who lives in Los Angeles, but he has never invited her to come to America. Brave Orchid found a Chinese American man for Moon Orchid's daughter to marry so

that she could come to America. As a result, Moon Orchid was able finally to come to the United States. However, Moon Orchid's husband has a second wife and has three children with her. Brave Orchid wants Moon Orchid to get angry and demand her place as the first wife. Moon Orchid is timid and acknowledges that her husband has supported her financially and sent their daughter to college. Moon Orchid's daughter wants her to look for her father as well so she can meet him.

The conversation turns to Moon Orchid wanting a job. Brave Orchid tells her some options are to work in the canneries, as a maid, or possibly at a restaurant in Chinatown. Brave Orchid sees her sister as being delicate and high-class from living in Hong Kong. Brave Orchid believes immigrants are now bad, for the Communists have taught them bad habits. Moon Orchid and her daughter are holding hands, and both feel sorry for one another's predicaments. Moon Orchid's daughter is married to a tyrant. Brave Orchid begins showing Moon Orchid her children's trophies and speaking of their accomplishments.

The next day, Brave Orchid continues talking about a trip to Los Angeles and confronting Moon Orchid's husband. Brave Orchid uses the example of her First-Sister-in-Law whose husband lived in Singapore with another wife. The First-Sister-in-Law showed up and chased the second wife away. The husband was forced to keep two homes for each of his wives. Brave Orchid begins counseling Moon Orchid about what she should demand. However, Brave Orchid does not like to travel, and Moon Orchid secretly hopes that the summer will pass without them traveling to Los Angeles.

Moon Orchid begins trying to figure out Brave orchid's children. The oldest girl is described as messy and absentminded; she has an American name that sounds like the word ink in Chinese. Next, if a daughter has a curled upper lip, it is the mark of an unlucky woman. A boy is described as being thickheaded, and Moon Orchid figures that the boy who is described like a bat must be in Vietnam. The nephew is described as having a round face and eyes. Last, the youngest girl is described as raging billows, for she is always yelling. Moon Orchid believes that these children are not as happy as the two real Chinese babies who died are. The American children look straight into Moon Orchid's eyes, and she describes them as having rough movements, peasant accents, and smelling like milk. Moon Orchid believes these children are vain, for they seem only to respond to compliments.

Moon Orchid tries to help around the house with chores, but she does not do them the way Brave Orchid would approve. Brave Orchid goes to the laundry later now with her sister. Brave Orchid walks with her sister and niece by Chinatown and Moon Orchid thinks that the Chinese there are Americans. At the laundry, Moon Orchid is unable to do the work well, and she sits at the front of the store on a crate. The narrator describes a bedroom in the back that was used for the whole family to sleep on late nights and for the sick children. The family breaks for lunch, and Brave Orchid takes her sister to Chinatown. The sisters go into a cool building where women are playing a game called hemp-bird. Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid leave, and Brave Orchid shows her sister where to buy groceries and where Skid Row is. The two go back to the laundry, and Moon Orchid learns to fold towels.

The summer days pass, and Moon Orchid continues to observe the children's activities. Moon Orchid usually has to sit on the crate in front of the laundry, for the heat inside is too much for her. The narrator recalls doing the same as a child and people walking by giving them money thinking they were beggars. Finally, Moon Orchid's daughter needs to return home to Los Angeles. Brave Orchid thinks it is time for Moon Orchid to make the trip to confront her husband as well.

The oldest son drives the women, and Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid are dressed up. Brave Orchid tells the story of the emperor with four wives. The Empress of the West was conniving, and the Empress of the East was good. Brave Orchid says Moon Orchid is more like the Empress of the East. The women discuss what they will do when they confront Moon Orchid's husband. Moon Orchid is still afraid, and her daughter wants to go home first. Moon Orchid's daughter had written her father years before to let him know she lived in Los Angeles, but he never responded.

The two sisters and the oldest son drive to a skyscraper where the husband works. Brave Orchid goes into the building and finds that it is a doctor's office. A woman, who we learn is the second wife, speaks to Brave Orchid in poor Chinese. This woman is described as being young and pretty. The husband is a brain surgeon, and Brave Orchid realizes he must be smart. Brave Orchid goes back to the car and tells Moon Orchid she met the second wife. Moon Orchid is still too frightened to go into the building, so Brave Orchid sends her son into the building to get the doctor by saying a lady has broken her leg in the street. The son does what he is told, and when the husband comes down, the son runs off.

The husband looks young, and he refers to the women as grandmothers. Brave Orchid tells the husband who they are, and he asks Moon Orchid why she has come. The husband says that he has a new, American life. The husband continues on stating that he took care of Moon Orchid and that his American wife does not know of her. A nurse comes down to check on the doctor. Brave Orchid asks the husband why he did not tell Moon Orchid he was not coming back or sending for her. The husband responds that his old life was like a book to him, and that Moon Orchid was like a character in a story. In the end, all three go to lunch together, and that is the end of the confrontation.

Moon Orchid goes to live with her daughter. Months go by and there has been no letter from Moon Orchid. Finally, Brave Orchid calls to check on Moon Orchid, and Moon Orchid whispers that someone is listening and hangs up quickly. Apparently, Moon Orchid is afraid of the Mexicans who live in the area, and she moves to an apartment across town. Moon Orchid remains afraid, and Brave Orchid wants her sister to come to her. When Moon Orchid steps off the bus, Brave Orchid notices how much thinner she has become.

Moon Orchid is still afraid of Mexicans, and her sister chants for her believing that she has misplaced her spirit. Brave Orchid even watches over her sister while she sleeps, but Moon Orchid gets worse. Moon Orchid covers all of the windows in the house, takes down the family pictures and cries when anyone leaves the house. Moon Orchid is eventually sent to a state mental asylum. Brave Orchid visits her sister at the asylum

twice and finds that she is happy there. Moon Orchid likes it that no one leaves, and she thinks the women there are her daughters. Moon Orchid dies in her sleep one night. Brave Orchid takes this as a sign that she may die soon, and warns her children not to let their father marry another woman. The daughters learn never to let men be unfaithful to them. The chapter ends with the statement that all of the children majored in science and math.

At the Western Palace Analysis

This part of the book tells the story of Moon Orchid, who is the sister of the narrator's mother Brave Orchid, and her arrival in America. This section gives the reader an important view into the experience of a new immigrant. Moon Orchid's arrival is very much like a celebration with gifts, candy and a big dinner. However, it is not long before Brave Orchid brings up an important matter of business, which is the fact that Moon Orchid's husband is married to another woman. Moon Orchid is intimidated by the idea of confronting her husband. Moon Orchid's daughter is also in a sad predicament in that the husband who Brave Orchid found for her is described to be a tyrant.

Moon Orchid tries to settle into family life with her sister. However, she is unable to learn the work at the laundry. Moon Orchid is also confused by Brave Orchid's American children. The children's manners and behaviors seem peculiar, rough and rude to her. These behaviors are due to cultural differences, and both the children and the aunt seem to offend one another. Moon Orchid does not seem to be able to help much with chores in the home either.

Finally, the time comes when the women confront Moon Orchid's husband. The confrontation ends up being useless, yet the husband's words tell quite a bit. The husband feels like his old life in China was a story and he has fully adopted his new, American life and family. This description is in sharp contrast with the difficulty Moon Orchid is having adapting to America.

Moon Orchid eventually ends up living with her daughter and eventually develops paranoia for Mexicans. Brave Orchid sends for her sister and tries to help her, but Moon Orchid seems to be losing her mind despite the traditional techniques her sister uses. Brave Orchid believes her sister has misplaced her spirit. This is a poetic way of describing the culture shock Moon Orchid is experiencing in America. Moon Orchid sadly ends up in an asylum and dies there in her sleep.

The chapter ends with the statement that all of Brave Orchid's children majored in science and math. This again reveals the difference between these American children and their Chinese relatives. In a sense, science and math become the antithesis of the stories and traditions of the Chinese culture.

Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe

Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe Summary

The chapter opens with the narrator confessing that the story about the trip to Los Angeles for Moon Orchid to confront her husband was told by her brother to her sister, and then her sister told her. The narrator compares her brother's bare, factual story to her designed one. The narrator's mother cut her tongue, the frenum, when she was a child. The narrator does not recall the incident, but her mother openly tells her she did it so the narrator would not be tongue-tied. The narrator compares her tongue with other children's tongues, but cannot see a difference.

The narrator states that she has difficulty talking. In kindergarten when the narrator was supposed to begin learning English she became silent and describes her voice as being broken. The narrator also painted black over all the drawings she made because she thought it looked like a stage curtain. The narrator flunked kindergarten and states that she and her sister were silent for three years. The narrator recalls liking the black kids at school because they would laugh and talk to her, but she did not like the Japanese kids who hit and chased her.

The narrator was happy with her quiet school days, and she does not become miserable until she learns that she has to talk. The narrator notes that other Chinese girls are quiet, too. In first grade the narrator has to begin reading out loud, and she describes having difficulty with words like "I" which in American is made up of three strokes while in Chinese it is seven. In second grade, there was a class play and none of the Chinese girls participated. In hindsight, the narrator realizes that their Hawaiian teacher should have understood the girls' situation.

After American school, the girls must go to Chinese school where the children chant and recite together. The children at the Chinese school run wild during their breaks. The narrator states that she did not find her voice at the Chinese school either. An example is seen when she and her sister have to recite a passage in front of the class. The sister goes first and her voice comes out strangely; the narrator recites the same passage and has the same strange voice. The narrator describes a time when the delivery boy from the drugstore accidentally tried to deliver her family medicine. The narrator's mother becomes upset and thinks the mistake is a curse. The narrator's mother takes her to the drugstore and makes her ask for reparation candy. At the drugstore, the employees think the family begged for the candy, and the mother believes she taught them a lesson in good manners.

The narrator describes how loud and ugly Chinese operas sound to Americans, and how a Chinese audience will talk through an entire piano recital. The narrator and her sister were referred to speech therapy every year, but they are able to speak normally for the therapists. The narrator describes learning to speak American feminine, or in a whisper. One girl that the narrator knows does not even speak up in Chinese school.

This girl is able to read aloud, but she does not talk. The quiet girl's older sister watches her, and both girls are very protected by their parents. The narrator, her sister and these girls are equally bad at sports, and the narrator describes being automatically walked at baseball. Kids talk about whether the one girl is mute, and the narrator says she has no friends because she does not bother to say hello to anyone.

The narrator claims that she hated the quiet girl and describes her China doll hairstyle and the wheezy sound that comes out of her flute. If the girls all stayed after school long enough, they could play with all of the equipment outside. Once the narrator's mother called the police on them for being too late and the girls have to be at Chinese school by five o'clock. One afternoon when the narrator was in the sixth grade, the quiet girl and the narrator were in the bathroom alone. The narrator describes wanting to make the girl talk and how much she hates her for her fragility. The narrator pokes the quiet girl, pinches her on the cheek and demands that she begin to talk. The quiet girl begins to cry. The narration digresses to a story of a boy who was made fun of for not knowing his father's name, even though the Chinese children know that his mother does not call the father by his real name and there is no way for the boy to know. Still in the bathroom, the quiet girl is sobbing, and the narrator continues pulling the girl's hair and telling her that she is disgusting. The narrator begins crying as well, and she feels like they have been in the bathroom forever. The narrator tells the girl that without talking the girl cannot have a personality. The narrator realizes she is doing a horrible thing and stops. The quiet girl's older sister shows up, and when the girls walk home together, the narrator tells the sister that her family should make the quiet girl speak.

After this event, the narrator spends the next eighteen months in bed with a mysterious illness. The narrator describes this time as the best year and a half of her life because nothing happened. Then one day, the narrator's mother tells her she is ready to get up and go to school again. The narrator recalls having to learn to walk again. When she goes back to school, the narrator finds that the quiet girl has not changed, and she and her sister are protected by, and live with, their family their whole lives.

The narrator describes having many secrets to hide. Once, her sixth grade teacher let the entire class read their school files. The narrator read that she had flunked kindergarten and in first grade got a zero on her I.Q. test. The files said that the narrator's father had been a farmer in China, but she knows that he was really a gambler and cannot say anything. The narrator and other immigrant children hear the words, "Don't tell," often in their childhood, for their parents are afraid of immigration. The children are described as being a type of ghost, for they were born in America, raised in America, and taught by ghosts. Rumors sometimes spread of immigration setting up in town to allow Mexicans and stowaways to straighten out their files. Some people think that this is a trap. Many lie about details in their lives and claim to be against Communism.

The narrator's mother keeps the Chinese traditions alive, but she never explains them to her children. The narrator states that the adults get mad if the children have to ask them about the traditions, and they are hit for making mistakes. For example, her mother swatted her for wearing a white ribbon in her hair. However, the narrator figures that it is

okay not to learn the traditions because then ghosts or gods will not hurt you. The narrator wonders if maybe everyone is just making up the traditions anyways, and if the children had to rely on being told, there would be no such thing as religion, sex, babies or death.

The narrator once believed that the difference between being sane and insane was related to talking. The narrator believed that if you spoke, you were sane and if you did not you were insane. The narrator claims to know many crazy girls and women. For example, there was a chatty woman who lived next door to them. The man and woman took the narrator and her sister to see a movie. The woman becomes very quiet, and the narrator claims to have seen silver heat rise from her body. Both of the girls become very afraid, and the husband drives them home quickly. The woman was eventually sent to an asylum, and the husband went to the Midwest. Later, the husband returns and brings with him a child who is half-Chinese and half white. Many people claimed that the child was the man's illegitimate son. However, the chatty woman returns and takes pleasure in caring for the son even though the narrator has seen him hit her. This woman dies happily sitting on the steps after cooking dinner.

The narrator begins telling the story of a girl called Crazy Mary whose family was converted to Christianity. The parents had left the girl in China as a toddler, where she remained until her parents were able to bring her to the United States at age 20. The parents were hopeful that she could learn English and translate for them. Crazy Mary is described as being a large girl with a mole on her face, which is considered a sign of good fortune. The narrator does not like looking at her, for she growls, hangs her head and is very pale. Crazy Mary was eventually locked up in an asylum. The narrator then describes a marsh where the family used to go to pick orange berries with which to cook. In this marsh, dead bodies were sometimes found. A witch woman is often in the marsh, and the narrator's brother names her Pee-A-Nah. This woman often chases the children who are careful to try to lead the woman away from their real homes.

The narrator believes that every home has a crazy woman and believes that she is the one in her home. The narrator describes herself as messy, always breaking things, and having adventurous people in her head with whom she talks. Once the narrator asks her sister if she has people in her head, and her sister is a bit shocked by her question which leads her to know that she does not. The narrator describes having nightmares of being a vampire. The narrator does not want to be the crazy woman in her home.

The narrator is relieved knowing that the family will not return to China because she does not want to be sold. No one speaks of Mao freeing women from prisons who refused to marry the men chosen by their parents or of the fact that he is against girl slavery and infanticide. The narrator's family is worried about what to do with all of the girls in their family. The narrator also has three girl cousins, and when they visit, their great grand uncle calls them maggots at the dinner table. The grand uncle finally gets a boy and spoils him.

Often the narrator is told that she has an ugly voice. The idea of marriage is already in the narrator's parents' minds. Once, the narrator overhears a Chinese opera, and the

daughter-in-law is singing, "Beat me," and everyone in the audience is laughing. Many men are putting ads in the paper looking for wives. The narrator notices men working in the laundry for a week at a time and only speaking with her parents in Chinese. The narrator calls these men FOBs, or Fresh Off the Boats. The narrator believes her clumsiness and voice are protecting her and her sister from these men.

A mentally retarded boy begins following the narrator around at the Chinese school, and she believes that he thinks she is as dumb as he is. The narrator believes that this boy may actually be a man because of the way he dresses and the bags of toys he carries around to give to the children. This boy, or man, begins sitting at the family laundry, and the narrator's parents do not mind. However, the narrator is distressed at the idea of no one seeing the difference between him and her. The narrator claims that she studies, gets A's and describes the man as being a birth defect and a monster. The narrator tries working different hours at the laundry to avoid the man, but he catches on. Once, the man uses the restroom, and the narrator's mother looks in the box he carries around and finds a variety of pornography, about which she and another woman laugh.

The story digresses to the narrator deciding that she has a list of two hundred things that she needs to tell her mother, so she would know the truth about her. For example, the narrator wants to tell her mother about fantasizing about being taken away by a white horse, picking on the quiet girl and fighting at school. The narrator states, "If only I could let my mother know the list, she – and the world – would become more like me, and I would never be alone again." The narrator decides to tell her mother one item on her list every day and chooses a quiet time in the evening. The narrator begins telling her mother small things, but her mother does not respond. After a few days, the mother is annoyed and thinks her daughter is talking craziness. The narrator realizes that she has interrupted the only quiet time in her mother's day and is a bit relieved that she can stop telling her mother things from her list.

The story returns to a day when the mentally retarded man visits the laundry again, and the narrator screams at her father. The narrator insists that her father should send the man away, states that she is smart and says that she will not be turned into a slave or wife because she is planning to go to college. The narrator says that she does not want to go to Chinese school anymore and does not want to listen to any more illogical stories. The narrator realizes that she has blurted out ten or twelve of the most difficult items on her list. The narrator's mother responds stating that she cut the narrator's tongue so she could talk more and tells the narrator she is not as smart as she thinks she is. The mother asks why the narrator cannot go to typing school. The narrator states that she wants her mother to leave her sister alone and quit showing her to men from the newspaper. The mother questions why the narrator does not say hello to the villagers, and the narrator responds that they do not address her. The mother says that these people do not have to answer to children. The narrator asks why her mother calls her ugly, and the mother responds that the Chinese say what is opposite. Finally, the mother tells the narrator to leave and calls her Ho Chi Kuei.

The narrator states that she left home to find logic and simplicity in life. Once she looked up the meaning of Ho Chi Kuei and determined that it may mean Good Foundation

Ghost, which would come from her American born status. The narrator states that colors are gentler away from home, and she never saw the retarded man again. The narrator claims that she still gets throat pain if she does not say what it on her mind. The narrator states, "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living." The narrator says that someday she would like to visit China to find out what is true about the Communists and what is her family lying. The narrator's mother still sends money to relatives, and the narrator knows that one day she will inherit an address book full of names for her to send money to. The narrator wonders about these people's lives.

The narrator tells a recent story and says that the beginning is her mother's and the end is hers. In China, the narrator's grandmother loved the theater. The grandmother would buy a big section, place a bed there and stay with the family for days and nights. There was always a danger of bandits following the theater, and once the family is worried about leaving their homes for the theater. The grandmother insists that the family go to the theater and leave the home unlocked. In the end, the bandits attack the theater and the whole family remains safe.

The narrator likes to think of these theater performances and ends the novel by telling about the songs of Ts'ai Yen who was a poetess born in 175 A.D. At the age of 20, the poetess was captured by a chieftain, held captive for twelve years and had two children. The barbarians would tie reeds to their flagpoles, horse's manes and tails, and arrows. These arrows would have a high whistle that was terrifying to their enemies. The poetess thought that this whistling was the barbarians' only music until one night she heard them playing flutes which disturbed her greatly. The poetess began singing about China, her family, and her anger and sadness. Eventually, the poetess was ransomed and married to Tung Su so her father could have Han descendents. One of the three remaining songs of the poetess is called "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," and the Chinese sing this song to their own instruments.

Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe Analysis

This part of the book focuses primarily on the theme of storytelling and reporting. Beginning in childhood, the narrator describes having difficulty speaking. The narrator's mother even cut her tongue to try to prevent her from becoming tongue-tied. The narrator describes having strange sounds emanate from her, yet she is able to speak well when she is speaking to the speech therapists. However, despite her own difficulties with speaking, the narrator describes hating a quiet girl, and there is a scene where she bullies her in an attempt to make her talk. The narrator is obsessed with this girl's decision not to speak.

Along with this difficulty of speaking, the narrator describes having to keep and hide the secrets of her family. The fear of immigration has been ingrained into her childhood. The narrator also describes the confusion of not being told of Chinese traditions, yet the family expects the children to learn them regardless. The narrator even drastically believes that the difference between sanity and insanity is tied with one's ability to

speak, and that a person who cannot speak is insane. There are several stories of speechless women who are described as being crazy. The narrator is afraid that she will be the crazy one in her family, and tells of the imaginary people with whom she speaks.

Another important aspect of speaking lies in the importance to the narrator of telling her mother a list of things from her life. The narrator believes that by doing this, the world and her mother will become more like her and she will not be so alone. The narrator's secrets make her feel isolated. However, her mother does not like listening to her list and thinks her daughter is being crazy. Ultimately, the narrator confronts her entire family and confesses her wants in life: to go to college, to make sense of the world, and to be a strong, independent woman. This confrontation leads directly to the narrator leaving home with the intention of finding logic and simplicity in life.

Mixed in with these anecdotes pertaining to storytelling and speaking, the narrator discusses the idea of marriage and Communism. The narrator is frightened that her parents are trying to find her a husband. The narrator is even more terrified at the idea of her parents believing that the retarded man following her around is a suitable match. The narrator also wishes to protect her younger sister from a fixed marriage. The narrator has equal interest in understanding the truth about Communism. The narrator is curious about how much of what the relatives say is true and longs to find out what life in China is really like.

The novel ends with the story of the narrator's grandmother loving the theater and the story of the poetess Ts'ai Yen. The story of Ts'ai Yen and her poetry that has survived approximately two thousand years shows the strength and power of reporting and storytelling. The narrator's words, "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" contain the heart of this novel. The narrator is trying to figure out her identity in the midst of so many influences. The narrator claims that she feels a pain in her throat if she does not say what is on her mind. This novel is essentially the result of the narrator telling her story, reporting, and being a woman warrior for doing so.

Characters

Aunt See Moon Orchid Brave Orchid Hong

Brave Orchid, Maxine's mother, tells stories like no other person can. Her "talk stories" lull her children to sleep with visions of mythical characters, historical fact, family tales, and legendary heroes and heroines. At the beginning of *The Woman Warrior,* Brave Orchid warns Maxine about the sins of adultery through her story of her husband's sister. Because this unmarried sister became pregnant- and ultimately, committed suicide-the family never speaks of her or even acknowledges her life. The sister brought disgrace to the family, and Brave Orchid cautions Maxine to keep silent about her knowledge, and more importantly, to avoid the same mistake.

Brave Orchid's own story begins in China, after her husband has left for America. She is a pretty young woman with naturally curly hair, thick eyebrows, and full lips. Her eyes have a direct and serious gaze. A strong person, Brave Orchid bears the pain of her first two children's deaths alone. After ten years of waiting for her husband's return, she decides to use the money she has saved to attend medical school in a distant city. She completes her studies in two years and returns to her village, a respected doctor. She stays in China and practices medicine and midwifery until 1939.

Leaving her medical practice behind her in China, Brave Orchid moves to America. Shortly after arriving in New York in 1940, she and her husband relocate to Stockton, California. There, she works with him in their laundry and picks tomatoes to supplement their income. She raises her six American-born children to know their Chinese roots, expecting them to adhere to Chinese customs. She frightens them with her talk of "ghosts" and warns them to avoid the "White Ghosts" in particular. When her children disobey her for any reason, Brave Orchid disciplines them with a firm hand and a sharp tongue. Maxine thinks her mother is hardest on her. Brave Orchid tells Maxine she is stupid, ugly, noisy, and humorless. She accuses Maxine of leading her sisters astray, and calls her "unusual." Even after Maxine reaches adulthood and moves away from home, a white-haired, heavyset Brave Orchid continues with "talk stories" intended to show her children true Chinese ways.

Maxine Hong

Maxine's earliest memories are of the stories her mother told her. They include accounts of Maxine's father's sister, a nameless aunt who brought disgrace to the family, and of the brave Fa Mu Lan, a young Chinese girl who fought battles for her own father. The stories prompt Maxine to create tales of her own, myths woven around images of herself as a girl trained to be a woman warrior who becomes a legendary heroine. In reality, Maxine is a Chinese girl born in America, struggling to make sense of two sets of traditions and values.

Maxine suffers continual disappointment when she tries to please her mother with her Americanized accomplishments such as good grades in school. She does not understand why her mother berates her and calls her "bad girl." She is confused by the special treatment her younger brothers receive. Their births merit special celebrations; they learn to speak English. She wonders why her mother cut her tongue and not those of her brothers and sisters.

When Maxine starts kindergarten, she speaks no English and must endure taunting from the other children. Her teachers worry that she has psychological problems because she is so silent and covers her drawings in black paint. Maxine is in the sixth grade when her Chinese differences, reflected in another quiet Chinese girl, cause her to act aggressively.

She pulls the girl's hair, pinches her cheeks, and tries to torment her into speaking. Maxine does not get the girl to speak, and Maxine, herself, ends up in bed for eighteen months. She never feels comfortable in American schools, where Chinese customs are neither understood nor valued.

Working in her father's laundry, Maxine experiences more confusion about her heritage. When she attempts to talk to her mother about her feelings, her mother tells her to quit talking. Maxine keeps her thoughts to herself, feeling guilty about the things she has done and the questions she has that she cannot discuss with anyone. Finally, when she can bear the guilt no longer, she spills her emotions to her mother, who tells her to leave.

The distance Maxine puts between herself and her family enables her to look at her heritage in a different light. She begins to unscramble her memories to try to resolve which experiences she has imagined and which ones are real, which experiences are representative of Chinese families and which are just family, and which experiences are typical of childhood and which ones are particular to her own childhood. Through reflection, she feels cleansed and hopeful. She discovers that she can think about going home again and even visiting China.

Fa Mu Lan

Fa Mu Lan is the mythical woman warrior about whom Brave Orchid tells her children. Fa Mu Lan disguises herself as a man and goes to battle in place of her aged father. She returns to her village victorious, a heroine for all Chinese women.

Her story empowers women to seek more out of life than being the wives and slaves of men who would claim to own them. As a young girl, Maxine envisions herself as Fa Mu Lan, enabling her to escape from the disappointments of her American life.

Moon Orchid

Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid's sister, arrives in San Francisco after having waited for thirty years for her husband to send for her. Moon Orchid's daughter, Brave Orchid's children, and Brave Orchid watch for her arrival at the airport. Brave Orchid expects some change in her sister after thirty years but is surprised to see the little old woman who acknowledges their greeting. Moon Orchid seems to have gotten shorter, and she is very thin. She has tiny fluttering hands and wears her gray hair in a bun. Most unsettling of all, Brave Orchid sees that Moon Orchid is old, even though she, herself, is one year older.

Although Moon Orchid expected her husband to invite her to come to America, he never did. He has, however, always sent money, provided servants, and supported their daughter. Brave Orchid, in the meantime, has worked constantly to get her sister to America. Now that Moon Orchid has arrived, Brave Orchid thinks that Moon Orchid should reclaim her husband from his new wife.

Moon Orchid does not want to take the new wife's place. She even says that the new wife can stay with them as a servant. Brave Orchid thinks her sister is lovely but useless and not very intelligent. Brave Orchid devises a plot to get the two back together. Moon Orchid reluctantly allows her sister to convince her to go along with the scheme but tells her that she is not quite ready for it. Meanwhile, Moon Orchid tries to adjust to life in America. Her sister's children confuse her. Because they accept her compliments, they appear rude. They have white hair and smell like cow's milk. In addition, she does not understand the work her sister's family does. She cannot help at the laundry because she has no skills.

After a few months, Moon Orchid's daughter decides to go back to Los Angeles to her family, which is also where Moon Orchid's husband lives. Even though Moon Orchid tells her sister that she is happy living with her, Brave Orchid insists that it is time for them to put their plan into action. Upon arrival in Los Angeles, Brave Orchid enters the husband's office, where he practices medicine. The beautiful, young nurse is his wife. Brave Orchid tricks the doctor into coming down to the car for a supposed emergency. There, he is shocked to see his Chinese wife. He tells her that he wants nothing to do with her and that there is no room for her in his new American life.

Moon Orchid goes to live with her daughter. Brave Orchid hears nothing from her for months. When she does, she learns that Moon Orchid has become afraid of everything. She brings Moon Orchid back to her own home, convinced that she can help her overcome her fear. Moon Orchid, however, slips into a world of her own. She becomes so ill that Brave Orchid commits her to a mental asylum, where she lives for the short remainder of her life.

Mother

See Brave Orchid Hong

No Name Aunt

No Name Aunt was Maxine's aunt who disgraced the family years before Maxine's birth. The aunt was Maxine's father's sister. No one speaks of this aunt. If family members spoke of her, then they would be admitting that she ever existed. According to Chinese tradition, a person who disgraces a family is a person whose existence is denied. According to the Hongs, this aunt never lived.

No Name Aunt's husband left for America in 1924 with Maxine's father. The aunt and her husband had just married. Years after the aunt's husband left, however, Maxine's mother noticed that the aunt looked pregnant. The family pretended not to see it and did not discuss it among themselves or with her. For the aunt to be pregnant so long after her husband had left was unthinkable-a disgrace to the family and to the village in which they lived.

Angry that the aunt should disgrace them, the village people raided the family's property on the night that the baby was to be born, killing their animals and destroying their home. They tore down doors, smeared blood on the walls, demolished food and furniture, and destroyed everything that belonged to the aunt. While no one knew the identity of the aunt's lover, the village people meant the destruction for him, too. The violence demonstrated to the aunt and her lover that the people did not tolerate the couple's breaking tradition. Families were supposed to stay whole. When families allowed outsiders to break their homes apart, everyone suffered the consequences.

The family angrily denounced the aunt after the villagers had left. They told her that she no longer existed for them, calling her "ghost" and wishing death upon her. She ran outside to the pigsty where she went into labor and delivered the baby. Knowing that she and the baby would have no home and would never be accepted, she chose to end its life and her own. She drowned her baby and herself in the family's well. In death, she became the "the drowned one," a weeping ghost whom Chinese fear because the ghost waits by the well to pull in a substitute.

Second Aunt

See Moon Orchid

Ting-Ting

See Maxine Hong

Ying Lan

See Brave Orchid Hong

Themes

Identity and Search for Self

People form their personal identities through life experiences and interactions with the people around them. *The Woman Warrior* collects five stories from Kingston's life that contribute to her growth as a person and the development of her identity.

From the time Maxine is a small child, she questions who she really is, and where she belongs in her family, Chinese culture, and American culture. As a kindergartner, Maxine does not speak.

She does not talk to her classmates or to her teachers. She struggles to overcome her inability to talk, trying to discover herself and to connect to her Chinese and American communities. Her mother's "talk stories" and admonitions about "ghosts" keep Maxine suspended between Chinese and American cultures. For three years, her silence is total. Underscoring the strangeness of her silence, she covers her school paintings in black paint. Her teachers fear for her sanity.

Maxine questions her mother's love for her, too. She sees that her parents treat the girls in the family differently than they treat the boys. For example, the family holds special birthday celebrations for the boys and praises their accomplishments.

On the other hand, the family members insult the girls and ignore them at every opportunity. Maxine's mother, especially, sends her messages that make her feel powerless. She berates Maxine, telling her that she is stupid and ugly. Yet, in a contradictory way, Maxine's mother tries to empower her, too, by allowing her glimpses of a different life. She tells Maxine stories of Fa Mu Lan, the famous girl warrior, who is strong, smart, and brave. Hearing these stories gives Maxine an idea that women might live lives entirely different from the one she lives or the one her mother lives.

She dreams of herself as a woman warrior. Maxine's mother, too, suffers an identity crisis. In China, Brave Orchid left her role as a traditional Chinese woman to attend medical school in a distant city. Upon graduation, she practiced medicine as a respected doctor and midwife. She comes to America, however, and finds herself the same mother, wife, and slave that she was before she became a doctor.

When Maxine reaches the sixth grade, her silent frustrations catch up with her and prompt her to attack another quiet Chinese girl, who reminds Maxine too much of herself. As a result, Maxine discovers and releases her angry voice, which she later uses to confront her mother. In voicing her frustrations, anger, and fears, Maxine reviews the indignities she has suffered. Her irate mother tells her to leave.

At a distance from her mother and her Chinese traditions, Maxine begins to reconcile her Chinese self and her American self. She comes to terms with her family and begins

to understand her heritage. She even begins to "talk story" herself. She at last claims an identity of her own.

Flesh vs. Spirit

Maxine's mother cautions her constantly about the various "ghosts" among whom she must live in America, warning Maxine not to imitate them. As a result, Maxine fears all the White Ghosts from the Taxi Ghost to the Police Ghost. She most fears the Newsboy Ghost, however. He stands in the street without his parents; she marvels at this blatant disobedience and runs from him in fear. Her mother reminds her, too, that Chinese ghosts exist in their own family and that she should absolutely avoid their mistakes. The No-Name Aunt, for one, represents family disgrace brought on by an overt act of defiance of tradition.

Though the ghosts in Maxine's life are not the supernatural kind, they cause her to experience the same kind of breathlessness people feel when they think they have encountered the supernatural. She feels smothered by the sheer number of American ghosts who surround her every day.

Only after Maxine reaches adulthood does she realize that her mother's talk of ghosts was really only Brave Orchid's denial of her life in America and a refusal to let go of her Chinese self. Eventually, Maxine's mother releases the image of the old China, accepting that it is not the same China that she knew in her past. As a result, Maxine can free the "ghosts" that have haunted her all her life and no longer fears China. When she does this, she finds she is able to accept both her mother and her own Chinese heritage.

Sexism

Maxine receives mixed messages from her mother regarding a woman's role in society. Sharing talk-story myths about the famous woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid permits Maxine to imagine herself as the victorious heroine. She dashes Maxine's dreams, however, with repeated stories such as the No Name Aunt's. Brave Orchid reminds Maxine through these stories that traditions live on in China, and traditions cannot be broken without punishment. Chinese women spend their lives serving their husbands and, especially, their in-laws. As is symbolized by the Chinese tradition of foot-binding, Chinese women are bound to a lifetime of self-denial. A proper Chinese woman allows her husband to provide for her while she serves as his maid and mistress.

Even in America, Chinese families nurture misogyny, or hatred of women. The grandfather of Maxine's cousins, for example, calls the girls "maggots." The woman-warrior image taunts Maxine, who despises the special treatment her brothers receive. The families hold big celebrations for the boys' birthdays and buy them wonderful gifts, like bicycles. They ignore the girls on their birthdays.

When girls do get gifts, they receive such things as typewriters, which prepare them for service. Maxine sees these discrepancies and reacts to them in a confrontation with her mother. Maxine would like to be the woman warrior, the Chinese woman who successfully breaks tradition.

Style

Structure

In addition to having a unique writing style, Kingston also uses an unusual structure in her organization of *The Woman Warrior.* The central theme focuses on a young Chinese girl's growing up in America and being pulled by the forces of both Chinese and American customs. Yet Kingston creates the drama of the girl's life through five separate stories of events through which the girl has matured. These five episodes help to show how the girl forms an identity for herself through the relationships she has with the women in her life.

Point of View

Kingston's use of the five separate stories allows her to change voices, or to tell the stories from different points of view. She tells four of the five stories from the first-person point of view. Through her own narrative, Kingston can take a stand and report events the way she sees them, speaking out against social and racial injustice. The one story that Kingston tells in the third-person narrative gives her silent aunt, Moon Orchid, a voice. Moon Orchid, never able to adjust to American life, suffers from mental illness. Telling Moon Orchid's story enables Kingston to appease Moon Orchid's "displaced spirit."

Setting

The narrator grows up in Stockton, California, where she was born in 1940. The events that actually occur in her life take place in California. Her imagined warrior life and her mother's "talk stories," however, take place in China. For example, the story of No-Name Aunt, the ghost aunt, occurs in China from about 1924 to 1934. In the chapter "White Tigers," Kingston's imagined self as a woman warrior lives in ancient China. "Shaman" is Brave Orchid's story about her life in China as a medical student and doctor, prior to her coming to America in 1939.

Symbolism

Symbolism provides substance for two of the five stories in *The Woman Warrior.* At the beginning of "Shaman," Brave Orchid is attending medical school after having spent the last decade or more of her adult life serving her husband and family as a traditional Chinese woman. When her fellow students challenge her to investigate a dormitory room that is supposedly haunted, she accepts the dare and spends the night in the room. The next day, she claims to have fought a fierce battle with "Sitting Ghost." She tells her friends that it still threatens them and convinces the girls to help her fight and

conquer it. The group holds a ritual that rids the room of the dangerous spirit. This act symbolizes Brave Orchid's battle with the confining role of Chinese women.

In "At the Western Palace," Moon Orchid has arrived from China to live with her sister in California. Moon Orchid epitomizes the traditional Chinese woman. She allows her sister to manipulate a forced meeting between Moon Orchid and her Americanized husband. She does not assert herself in any way. The tiny, gray-haired, old woman keeps quiet about everything and eventually fades away in a mental asylum. Her name, Moon Orchid, symbolizes her nonentity.

Figurative Language

Brave Orchid uses the word "ghost" in a figurative way. That is, the ghosts to which she refers most often are not supernatural beings, but Americans. She warns her children about White Ghosts of all kinds: Teacher Ghosts, Coach Ghosts, Taxi Ghosts, Police Ghosts, the Newsboy Ghost, and so on. Black Ghosts exist, too, but the children could fear them less because they were more distinct; Black Ghosts could not sneak around as easily as White Ghosts could. Other ghosts to whom Brave Orchid refers less frequently are those Chinese who have brought disgrace upon themselves or their families. No Name Aunt represents these Chinese ghosts.

While Brave Orchid warns her children about American ghosts, she does not mean to belittle Americans. She just refuses to accept her position in America and hates to release her image of herself as a respected Chinese woman.

Historical Context

Women in Chinese Society

Kingston takes revenge on centuries of Chinese female oppression in The Woman Warrior. Additionally, she comes to terms with her family and their place in American society. Through her "talk stories" about herself and her female relatives, Kingston paints a picture of Chinese tradition that portrays women as objects controlled by men and used as slaves. From the days of Confucius, and reaching into the early twentieth century, the Chinese placed family above social order, and men above women. When people married, new family ties formed, and new wives became particularly subservient to their grooms' parents. Women from the higher classes lived extremely secluded lives and suffered such treatments as foot-binding. The Chinese chose young girls who were especially pretty to undergo foot-binding to keep their feet as small as possible. The binder bent the large toe backward, forever deforming the foot. Men favored women with bound feet, a sign of beauty and gentility, because it signified that they could support these women who were incapable of physical labor. While Kingston includes some stories of such subservient women, she also offers glimpses of mythical Chinese women who have broken the bonds of slavery to become warriors, heroines, and swordswomen. Kingston's own mother has offered her these visions. According to critic Diane Johnson in the *New York Review of Books,* Kingston "has been given hints of female power, and also explicit messages of female powerlessness from her mother, who in China had been a doctor and now toiled in the family laundry." Henry Allen, in the *Washington Post,* calls the resulting stories "a wild mix of myth, memory, history and lucidity which verges on the eerie." Mary Gordon gives Kingston credit for the technique, saying in the *New York Times Book Review,* "the blend ... [is as] ... relentless as a truth-seeking child's."

Chinese Political History

The Woman Warrior opens with Kingston's mother telling the story of her husband's sister who disgraced the family by having a child out of wedlock and then committing suicide. The year was 1924, when many men left China for America. China was experiencing political unrest at the time. After living under more than 3,000 years of imperialistic rule, Chinese revolutionaries forced the last Qing emperor to abdicate the throne. Sun Yat-sen became the temporary president of the Chinese Republic, supported by even the most conservative Chinese. Yuan Shikai succeeded Sun Yat-sen but died in 1916. From that time until 1928, warlords ruled China. Even though the government was unstable, the people of China began to think more liberally, adopting many Western ideas, denouncing imperialism, and attacking the social order established by Confucius. Historians refer to this nationalistic period as the May Fourth movement. At the same time, though, many Chinese embraced the newly-introduced Marxism, with Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) leading the first Chinese Communist Party.

Even though China now boasted a Communist party, Russian Communists did not support it. They instead rallied behind the Nationalist Party because it had more members and more political clout.

Their intent was to rid China of the warlord influence and make way for socialism. Sun Yat-sen led this Nationalist Party, or the Kuomintang (Guomindang), from 1912 until 1925. In 1923, the Russian Communists and Kuomintang demanded that Chinese individuals join their ranks, and the Kuomintang began to adhere more closely to Russian Communism. This alliance did not last long, however, because the Kuomintang troops attacked the Chinese Communist Party and the Shanghai labor movement in a bloody massacre. Chiang Kai-shek, who had been Sun Yat-sen's military advisor, led the massacre and took over the Kuomintang when Sun died in 1925. It was Chiang and his troops who, during the Northern Expedition, destroyed the power of Chinese warlords. Kingston refers to both the warlords and the Communist rule in the chapter entitled "White Tigers." In a blending of ancient Chinese myth and modern Chinese history, she envisions herself as the female warrior who avenges the wrongs her family and country have suffered at the hands of the revolutionaries and Communists.

Critical Overview

Kingston finished writing *The Woman Warrior* during her seventeen-year stay in Hawaii. At the same time that she was working on *The Woman Warrior,* she was also writing *China Men.* She told Timothy Pfaff of the *New York Times Book Review* that she thinks of the two books as "one big book.

I was writing them more or less simultaneously." She hesitated to send *The Woman Warrior* to publishers, however, because she did not know what they would think of it. While publishers seldom print a writer's first attempt, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., took a chance on Kingston and her book's unusual style and content. The company published *The Woman Warrior* in 1976 as nonfiction. Surprisingly, the public liked the book so much, it promptly made the bestseller list. It also earned the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction that year and held the honor of being one of the top ten nonfiction books of the 1970s.

Critics applaud Kingston for her strong feminist voice and her ability to battle social and racial injustices through her use of words. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Pin-chia Feng calls Kingston "one of the most outspoken contemporary feminist writers" and a "word warrior." Critics also credit Kingston's expertise for translating stories told in oral form into written stories that maintain the unique characteristics of the Cantonese dialect that is spoken in her community. She does a thorough job of telling about a Chinese- American girl's growing up and being torn between Chinese traditions and American customs. Through a combination of myth and reality, she uncovers the Chinese tradition of male dominance and female oppression, and a Chinese-American girl's battle against it. In a *Washington Post Book World* review, William McPherson describes *The Woman Warrior* as "a strange, sometimes savagely terrifying and, in the literal sense, wonderful story of growing up caught between two highly sophisticated and utterly alien cultures, both vivid, often menacing and equally mysterious." Yet Kingston also builds the less-alien image of an important, though seldom-voiced, strength in ties between a Chinese-American girl and her mother. A good example of the result of a modern-thinking Chinese mother's influence on her Chinese-American daughters occurs at the end of Moon Orchid's story, *At the Western Palace,* in *The Woman Warrior.*

Kingston writes, "Brave Orchid's daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics." Kingston's blend of legend and personal truths results in a work so unique that it is difficult to classify as fiction or nonfiction, biographical or autobiographical. Paul Gray says in *Time,* "Art has intervened here. The stories may or may not be transcripts of actual experience." The very traits that earn the book favorable reviews, though, are also the ones that reap criticism. For example, many reviewers appreciate Kingston's attempts to tell about the Chinese- American woman's experience in America through the author's own life stories. Others, however, do not think that her stories present the truth for the community of all Chinese-American women.

These critics think that Kingston combines too much fiction with the truth in her stories to be able to claim that she's reporting the Chinese-American woman's reality. Another aspect of Kingston's style that earns both approval and disapproval is her blending of traditional Chinese myths and legends with the events of her own life. Asian- American reviewers and scholars who study Chinese customs, history, language, and literature very much disapprove of this technique. They say that Kingston is twisting long-time Chinese history and legend, changing them to fit her needs. The best example of this in *The Woman Warrior* occurs in the chapter "White Tigers." The original legend tells of a woman who replaces her elderly father in a military draft. Kingston's version, however, makes the woman an aggressor who takes revenge on male dominance by killing the emperor. Critics view this misrepresentation as Kingston's most crucial mistake because it makes the book generic, unbelievable, and not true to Chinese heritage. Paul Gray, a critic for Time, agrees with the Asian- American critics and scholars, saying the book is "drenched in alienation" and "haunts a region somewhere between autobiography and fiction." While critics cannot agree to appreciate the methods Kingston used to write *The Woman Warrior,* they can agree on its power. The book invokes a broad range of emotions—including rage, pride, enchantment, and inspiration. As a result, *The Woman Warrior* has won many awards, and educators use it extensively not only in literature classes, but also in women's studies, sociology, ethnic studies, and history classes.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Donna Woodford is a doctoral candidate at Washington University and has written for a wide variety of academic journals and educational publishers. In the following essay she discusses how the theme of the power of language unites the stories that make up Kingston's autobiography.

Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts,* differs from most autobiographies in that it is not a first-person narration of the author's life. Rather, it is a form of nonfiction that, as Paul Mandelbaum says, "allows for—even thrives on—the vagaries of memory, translation, and point of view." Kingston tells her own life story by telling the stories of other women whose lives have impacted hers. This work of nonfiction is made up of memories, fantasies, and speculations about these women. In telling the stories of her mother, her aunts, the folk figure Fa Mu Lan, and the historical figure Ts'ai Yen, Kingston is seeking to find "ancestral help" which will allow her to understand her own life. If she can see their lives "branching into" her own, then she can better understand her own place in the world. In telling these stories she is also struggling to reconcile her identity as a member of two cultures, Chinese and American, who does not feel entirely at home in either culture.

As a Chinese American woman she struggles to combat what Shirley Geok-Lin Lim has called "the cultural silencing of Chinese in American society and ... the gendered silencing of women in Chinese society." She combats both of these forms of silence through the telling of stories about women who are either literally or mythically her ancestors, and because words are her weapons against silence, racism, and sexism, the power of language becomes a central and unifying theme in the book and the means through which Kingston can discover and relate her own identity. The first chapter of Kingston's autobiography tells the story of the "no name woman," her aunt who disgraced the family by committing adultery, having a baby, and then drowning herself in the family well. Because this is a secret, shameful story, the chapter and the book begin with Kingston's mother telling her, "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you." Thus even the opening line of the book suggests the immense power of language. Kingston, in thinking about this story, says, "I have thought that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that 'aunt' would do my father mysterious harm." But she comes to realize that the silence is not only a way of protecting her father and the family from shame, but also a way of punishing her aunt. Denying her aunt their voices and refusing to tell her story or even to acknowledge that she was born is the harshest form of punishment the family can inflict, and Kingston, by including her aunt's story as part of her autobiography, is reversing that punishment, but she is also endangering herself. She may become the "substitute" for her aunt. Her mother has told her this "story to grow up on" as a warning that if she is rebellious like her aunt, she could also be denied a story that ties her to her family and her culture. The story of her aunt highlights the dangers of speaking out even as it emphasizes the power of language.

The second chapter also emphasizes the power of language and story telling, but in a more positive manner. Although Kingston is distressed at the many Chinese expressions which compare girls to maggots or slaves, she also acknowledges that the Chinese stories her parents tell her offer another image of women. Girls can grow up to be "heroines, swordswomen." Kingston realizes that when she is listening to her mother tell stories she is "in the presence of great power." The story of Fa Mu Lan, which begins as one of stories told to Kingston by her mother and continues as a fantasy in which Kingston becomes Fa Mu Lan, makes the power of language even clearer. Fa Mu Lan becomes a representative of the power of language not only because she is a figure "told of in fairy tales," remembered and revered, unlike Kingston's no-name aunt, but also because of the words which are carved on her back, "words in red and black files, like an army." The words themselves become soldiers in the war, and they also turn Fa Mu Lan's body into a weapon, a living testament of the wrongs done to her family. The words furthermore connect Kingston, the writer, to Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior, since both use words as weapons: "what [they] have in common are the words at [their] backs." If the story of Kingston's no-name aunt illustrated that refusing to tell stories could be a form of punishment, Kingston's version of the Fa Mu Lan story shows that telling a story can be a form of vengeance: "The idioms for revenge are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance-not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words." Kingston, through her writing, discovers that she, like her mother and Fa Mu Lan, has the great power of story telling. In the third chapter, "Shaman," Kingston gives a more detailed picture of her mother's powerful use of language. She tells the story of her mother as a young woman who, like Fa Mu Lan, leaves her family to be educated and then returns to serve her community. She tells of how her mother and the other women at the medical school are "new women, scientists who changed the rituals" and who learn to chant the "horizontal names of one generation" instead of the traditional chant of ancestor's names. Brave Orchid's courage in forging these new trails connects her, like her daughter, to the woman warrior. And, like her daughter and the Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid is able to use language in battle, as when she fights the sitting ghost.

Her fight against the ghost is primarily one of language, insults which she hurls at the ghost even as it is crushing her. She defeats the ghost, as Sidonie Smith has noted, with "the boldness of her word and the power of the images she voices to taunt him into submission and cowardice." Her command of language not only allows her to defeat the ghost but also to describe the battle to her friends in such a way that she makes herself seem stronger and nobler. In Smith's words, she "author[s] herself as a powerful protagonist." It is this same powerful authoring that Kingston will inherit from her mother, and this is how her mother's story becomes Kingston's story and provides her with ancestral help. The chapter closes with Kingston realizing how much she and her mother have in common: "I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years. I am practically a first daughter of a first daughter." Their use of language and storytelling connects them and empowers both of them.

The fourth chapter tells the story of another aunt, Brave Orchid's sister, Moon Orchid, who lacks the story telling power of her sister and niece. Moon Orchid, unlike her sister, is not brave enough to venture alone into new territories. She waits for thirty years for

her husband to send for her. Nor does she have the brave, commanding voice of her sister. When forced to confront her husband she cannot even manage to speak: "her voice was fading to a whisper." Her lack of language becomes the weapon her husband uses against her when he tells her that he has important guests who come into his house and "you can't talk to them. You can barely talk to me." Not only is she unable to leave the confines of her family and create a new path, as Brave Orchid did, but her lack of language also prevents her from maintaining her role within her family. She is speechless and therefore helpless. Without the security of her husband and her traditional place in Chinese society, Moon Orchid goes insane, which Brave Orchid recognizes by the change in her story telling: "The difference between mad people and sane people ... is that sane people have variety when they talk story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over." But if Moon Orchid is not able to empower herself through story telling, her story does become a source of empowerment for her nieces. Kingston weaves the simple story of her aunt into a complicated knot which gives her ancestral help by showing her the importance of being strong and vocal like her mother and not weak and quiet like her aunt, and all the girls vow never to let a man be unfaithful to them. Their aunt has become another family story for them to grow on, a warning of the danger of weakness and silence just as the story of the no name aunt was a warning of the danger of breaking boundaries.

The final chapter is full of powerful stories about language. Kingston describes her difficulties in speaking up for herself, and she wonders if it is because her mother cut too much of her tongue in an attempt to ensure that she would never be tongue-tied. She also tells how she cornered the quiet girl in the bathroom at school, taking her fear of her own silence out on the only person quieter and weaker than she felt herself to be. Additionally Kingston confesses that she is ashamed of her mother's loud voice and the way she is always insisting that Kingston translate embarrassing things for her. She reveals how her difficulty with speaking is connected to her confusion over her place in two different cultures: "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves Americanfeminine.

Apparently we whispered even more than the Americans." But the story with which she ends this chapter, and the book, resolves these conflicts. The story of Ts'ai Yen, a poet alone in a foreign land, becomes the story of Kingston and her mother. Both of them are, like Ts'ai Yen, women using language to help them make a place for themselves in a foreign land. And like Ts'ai Yen, they are, through language, able to bring their two cultures together, to "translate well" between them. Thus, though Kingston's book is not a traditional autobiography, it does relate her struggle to understand herself as a member of two cultures, and it details her search for a voice of her own. As Sidonie Smith has said, Kingston recognizes the "inextricable relationship between an individual's sense of 'self' and the community's stories of selfhood, [and] self-consciously reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women." As a member of more than one culture, Kingston cannot "read herself into existence" with only one story. Since language is such a crucial part of her identity, the stories with which she chooses to define herself must also convey the power of language. By weaving together the stories of these women and the impact of language

and story telling on their lives, Kingston is truly telling the story of her own life, and the story of her struggle to find a language in which to tell her story.

Source: Donna Woodford, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Schueller examines the way in which The Woman Warrior questions accepted cultural definitions of female and ethnic identity.

Ever since its publication in 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has been praised as a feminist work. But while critics have written extensively about the articulation of female experience in *The Woman Warrior,* they have been unable to deal simultaneously with the questions of national and racial identity that the book so powerfully raises. However, if we approach women's writing as centrally concerned not strictly with gender but with oppression, we can fruitfully examine the conjuncture and relationship between female and ethnic identity, an important issue not only for this text but for feminist theory as well. I will briefly examine the politicization of female identity offered by some feminist critics and then examine *The Woman Warrior* as a dialogic text, one which subverts singular definitions of racial and ethnic identity and which valorizes intersubjectivity and communication....

Feminist critics have long recognized that what constitutes female experience is not biological gender or a specific female psyche but the constraints and limitations felt by women as a result of the cultural constitution of gender and the phallocentric organization of society. To write socially and politically as a woman is therefore to question the truth status and ostensible ideological neutrality of cultural norms and institutions.... What is politically important for women and racial minorities is not to frame correct definitions of female and ethnic identity but to question all such definitions. Above all it means to reject the concept of a stable and autonomous self upon which such definitions depend....

Few contemporary American writers are as aware of the need to question and subvert accepted cultural definitions as Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior* is a sustained subversion of cultural, racial and gender definitions and an affirmation of a radical intersubjectivity as the basis of articulation. *The Woman Warrior* is a collection of "memoirs" of Kingston's experiences of growing up in an immigrant family in Stockton, California. Kingston reveals the squalor and poverty of Chinatowns, the endemic racism, the traumas of acculturation in a hostile environment, and her own attempt to subvert gender hierarchies by imaginative identification with the woman warrior. But although Kingston writes polemically against the subjugation of women and the racial hostility experienced by Chinese Americans, she does not do so from a position of stability or unity. Articulation itself is a complex issue in the text. The very act of speaking involves breaking through the gender and race barriers that suppress voicing from the margins. But the voice Kingston speaks through is not isolated and autonomous. It refracts, echoes, and is creatively conjoined with the numerous voices with which it interacts. This undefined basis of narration dramatizes Kingston's determination not to create singular definitions of ethnic identity in order to combat the impoverishing stereotypes to which Chinese Americans are subject, not to postulate the foundations of a new hierarchy.

It is clear at the very outset that the act of articulation itself will be a major concern in the book. Kingston begins her memoirs with a secrecy oath imposed on her by her indomitable mother: "You must not tell anyone," and a moral drawn from the story of the adulterous aunt who has been banished from family memory. "Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born." Kingston is aware of the temerity involved in the very act of her writing. To articulate herself she must break through the numerous barriers that condemn her to voicelessness. The unnamed narrator thus begins her recollections with the act of listening rather than speaking. Sworn to silence, she hears the tale of the unnamed aunt who gives "silent birth" to "save her inseminator's name." This initial story establishes the denial of expression women are condemned to in patriarchy and the cultural stranglehold the narrator must fight in order to express herself....

But the anxiety of articulation is also peculiarly a racial one. Kingston is sensitive to the brutality and degradation experienced by Chinese immigrants. *China Men* records the heroism of Chinese railroad workers and sugarcane planters who survive hostility and violence. Living in a culture that had for long grouped Orientals with imbeciles and denied Chinese immigrants legal and naturalization rights, the present-day immigrants in *The Woman Warrior* still live in fear. Immigrants thus "guard their real names with silence" and even after years of living in America avoid signing innocuous permission slips for their children at school. The narrator realizes that "silence had to do with being a Chinese girl." In the American school she is overcome by dumbness, her voice reduced to a whisper. In the Chinese school she finds her voice but it is a strained one: "You could hear splinters in my voice, bones rubbing jagged against one another."... Kingston's voicelessness is a symbolic expression of the culture's refusal to give her voice legitimacy. But the alternative to this disempowerment, Kingston knows, is not to create a "true" Chinese woman's voice or to define a singular Chinese identity to celebrate, but to question the very political structures that make positions of power and powerlessness possible. Kingston deconstructs oppositions between American and Chinese, male and female, and most importantly between Self and Other by articulating herself through a language in which opposed and diverse voices constantly coexist.

By doing so, Kingston questions the values of the autonomous self and definitions of racial and sexual identity, and simultaneously presents dialogic intersubjectivity and community as the realm of hope and possibility....

Kingston deals with the necessity of maintaining and creating multiple ideological positions, of always letting the numerous voices echo in her own articulations. For Kingston this refraction of other voices is an affirmation of community and diversity. Thus it is appropriate that the final story of the book emphasizes differences and communicative interaction. "Here is a story my mother told me ... recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." As opposed to the beginning of the book where the mother silences her, here the narrator emphasizes how their voices are inextricably and dialogically linked, even if they are different....

The narrating voice as it emerges in *The Woman Warrior* is thus highly provisional, always full of echoes of other voices, and never autonomous. Kingston does not merely

wish to appropriate power and write an authoritative "marginal" text. She wishes to celebrate marginality as a position of writing and not to postulate a new source of authority or a new hierarchy.... Denying universality, absolute values, and an autonomous self are crucial to writings of all marginal groups. Just as it is important for Kingston to treat gender as a site of difference, it is vital for her to treat race too as a play of differences. Indeed to view *The Woman Warrior* as a book about an essential, abstract, female self beyond culture and society is to miss the point entirely. The immigrant experience is an integral part of the book. Kingston is sensitive to the dehumanizing definitions Chinese Americans are subject to and is determined not to perpetuate the same by merely inverting the hierarchies. At the base of such definitions is the destructive binary logic which hierarchically divides male and female, self and other, white and non white. [In his book *Orientalism,* Random House, 1978] Edward Said has compellingly demonstrated how such hierarchies have operated in depictions of the "Oriental" as the passive and denatured Other. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston questions and undoes oppositions that make such sterile racial definitions possible.

The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* is uniquely positioned to dialogically question racial oppositions. She is the daughter of Chinese immigrants for whom America is temporary exile, and China home, but who nevertheless will stay in America. Her only reality is America, but it is the America of the margins (Kingston makes no bones about Stockton being a racial and economic ghetto). She goes to Chinese school and to American school. Her own undefinable position is a metaphor for the way in which ethnicity will operate: "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.... The dragon lives in the sky, ocean, marshes, and mountains; and the mountains are also its cranium.... It breathes fire and water; and sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many." ...

On an obvious level Kingston obviously creates clear cultural oppositions, indeed as if she were speaking in the voice of the monocultural reader. American life is logical, concrete, free, and guarantees individual happiness; Chinese life is illogical, superstition-ridden, constricted by social roles, and weighted down by community pressures. The American school teaches that an eclipse is "just a shadow the earth makes when it comes between the moon and the sun"; the Chinese mother prepares the children to "slam pots and lids together to scare the frog from swallowing the moon" during the next eclipse. American culture promises the young girl opportunity for excellence if she gets straight 'A's. She can go to college. But she also has the freedom to be a lumberjack in Oregon. In China the girl fears she will be sold as a slave; or within the immigrant community she will be married off to a Fresh Off the Boat Chinese. Indeed the structure of hierarchical oppositions is so cleverly set up that the narrator's growth might be equated with being fully "American."

But Kingston sets up these hierarchies only to subvert and make undecidable these singular oppositions. "To make my waking life Americannormal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible dreams." But just as the conventional American reader might begin to feel at ease with the comfortable hierarchy (American-normal, Chinese-deformed), Kingston challenges it. "When the thermometer in our

laundry reached one hundred and eleven degrees on summer afternoons, either my mother or my father would say that it was time to tell another ghost story so that we could get some good chills up our backs." American-normal reality gets so nightmarish that Chinese ghost stories are needed to chase it away into imaginary chills. Not only is the cultural hierarchy subverted but the traditional associations of logicality and dreams are suspended....

Kingston's questioning of oppositions and her resistance to definition are intensely political strategies. For the marginal writer who is often the subject of singular definition, such a dialogic stance is often a strategy of survival. Kingston thus problematizes and subverts racial definitions in order to reveal the dangers of maintaining them.... [Kingston] presents Chinese culture as a conglomeration of diverse, multiple, often contradictory values that she does not attempt to unify into an easy explanation. Such unities, for Kingston, are the hallmarks of tourist propaganda, not lived culture. Kingston does not believe in the possibility of representing Chinese culture because that assumes that there is a simple "Chinese" reality and culture easily available for representation. As Kingston said [in Marilyn Yalom, *Women Writers of the West Coast: Speaking of Their Lives and Careers,* Capra Press (Santa Barbara), 1983], "There are Chinese American writers who seek to represent the rest of us; they end up with tourist manuals or chamber of commerce public relations whitewash." In *The Woman Warrior* every aspect of Chinese culture and Chinese immigrant life is so diverse that it resists generalization. The striking contrast between the strength of the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, who becomes a doctor in China and fights for her rights in America and Moon Orchid who accepts the role of abandoned wife, is only one of several. Immigrant Chinese range from the wealthy, Americanized husband of Moon Orchid, to the Stockton Chinese who maintain their native village affiliations, to refugees from the revolution. And the difference between the immigrant Chinese and the Chinese from the narrator's village is so vast that to the untutored eyes of Moon Orchid, the former appear like foreigners. "I'm glad to see the Americans talk like us" says Moon Orchid to her sister. "Brave Orchid was ... again startled at her sister's denseness. 'These aren't the Americans. These are the overseas Chinese'."...

The Woman Warrior thus subverts all forms that have the potential of providing cultural stability and unity.... Kingston writes polemically as a Chinese-American woman confronting and battling with the patriarchal, white American culture but she does so from a position that is radically unstable. She writes as a woman, but destabilizes the concept of gender; she speaks as a Chinese American, but questions racial definitions. Authorship therefore becomes a complicated question because Kingston refuses to give us a traditional position from which she articulates. This does not mean that the text is apolitical or socially meaningless. Gender and race are important to Kingston, but not as transcendent and true categories. Kingston does not dismiss or destroy these categories, but radically transvalues them by making them dialogically interactive. And because she subverts these categories only in relation to the singular definitions imposed by the dominant culture and does not attempt to lay the foundations of another (more pure or true) set of categories, she resists impoverishing the issues of gender and race.

Source: Malini Schueller, "Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in *The Woman Warrior,"* in *Criticism,* Vol XXXI, No. 4, Fall, 1989, pp. 421-437.

Critical Essay #3

In the following article, Ling contrasts the role of woman as victim and victor in Kingston's The Woman Warrior.

In *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts* [1982], Albert Stone identifies several situations which he calls "occasions" for the writing of autobiography. The first is "the situation of an old man looking back over a long career and significant stretch of history to recapture the personal past against the background of sweeping cultural change." As examples of this type, Stone discusses *The Education of Henry Adams* and the *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* though the most famous example, of course, would be Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography....* Stone's second autobiographical occasion is the account of one's spiritual growth or journey, as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), *Black Elk Speaks* (1931), and more recently Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). A third occasion is physical or psychic violence, as recorded in the lives of Helen Keller, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, and Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist.* Stone's fourth occasion is the need to bridge a psychic split between private and public self, a "split in social experience (which) ... defines women's identities even more painfully-and creatively-than it does for other groups ... tensions between old conventions and new circumstances, between rigid social stereotypes and the urge to define oneself in wider terms." This is the situation which occasioned Maxine Hong Kingston's critically acclaimed book, *The Woman Warrior* (1976).

Constructing a plausible self-identity is, according to Stone, an original act, an act of creation or recreation, necessarily involving an examination of the cultural myths and national contexts which shaped this self. And since "myth and ideology, as Warren Susman has argued, are equally essential to history in general, their presence and weight must be traced in personal history as well." All of this Kingston does. For some readers, her selfrecreation is a confusing act because she does not remain within the traditional bounds of any genre. *The Woman Warrior* is not structured by chronology, the usual method, nor is its mode strictly factual; instead, the narrative is fractured, and fact and fiction are mingled. Kingston blends myth and history, not the confirmable myths of the Chinese people, but myths as filtered to her through her mother's consciousness and memory, actually what Kingston remembers of her mother's stories. As E. L. Doctorow inserted facts, historical figures, into his fiction *Ragtime,* Kingston incorporates fiction (the legend of Fa Mulan) into her facts.... On a fundamental level, *The Woman Warrior* is made coherent by thematic threads: woman as both victim and victor, and voice as power.

Woman as victim is dramatically established in the very first episode, which begins with an injunction and a simple disclosure:

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born...." Kingston is told this story at puberty as a lesson and a warning; a woman must guard her chastity and

honor or she will be cast off. Her own family's silence negates the rebellious aunt's existence and is greater punishment than the havoc wreaked on the family home by angered villagers.

However, instead of accepting the story as a moral lesson and keeping it to herself, as an obedient Chinese daughter should, Kingston, the American, not only disobeys her mother's injunction by telling the story but even elaborates on it. She speculates on the circumstances that would bring a woman to an affair, moving from the most conventional explanations to the most shocking. Perhaps it was coercion and "some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil" or perhaps, a dreamer like Kingston herself, she fell in love with an ephemeral aspect:

She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip. For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that's all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family. She offered us up for a charm that vanished with tiredness, a pigtail that didn't toss when the wind died. Why the wrong lighting could erase the dearest thing about him. Or she might have been "a wild woman" who "kept rollicking company," or perhaps it was incest. Kingston imagines how this aunt must have felt watching the enraged villagers defile, destroy and loot her family's home and sympathetically and practically wonders if a general famine had anything to do with the punishment's taking the form of stealing the family provisions. She recreates with a heroic cast the aunt's experience of giving birth alone at night under the stars, suckling her baby and finally hardening herself and jumping with it into the family drinking well. The suicide was paradoxically an act of love and caring, for the fate of an unwanted female orphan in old China would invariably be a miserable one.

For twenty years, Kingston had remained silent, joining the rest of her family in punishing this aunt, but now, in telling her story, in calling this outcast "my forerunner," Kingston not only acknowledges her but identifies with this woman who dared to defy conventions, to break taboos, to be her own person. Though victor and vanquished, or victim for our purposes, are generally diametrically opposed, in this instance they may be found in the same person. The no-name aunt is undoubtedly a victim of the conventions of her society, her family, or her personal weakness, but at the same time, in a small measure, she is a victor through her own suicide, for by jumping into the family well, she polluted the family drinking water and gained her revenge. In a larger measure, however, Kingston's telling of her story gains her aunt a victory, for not only is the family silence broken and the aunt restored to her place, but through her speculations, Kingston has extended, to this earlier rebel, not only understanding and sympathy, but even tribute. The second chapter, "White Tigers," clearly presents woman as victor. Kingston elaborates extensively on the original Chinese legend, which comprises only a dozen lines. Her embellishment includes a mystical Taoist training for the woman warrior's childhood, a life of sacrifice and discipline on a mountain top with an old couple who possess superhuman powers. For Mulan, Kingston borrows a striking event from a legend of a male general, Yueh Fei-the carving of the battle cause in characters on her bare back. In Kingston's version, though Mulan is playing the male role successfully, nonetheless, she does not deny herself female satisfactions, for her

fiance joins her on her campaigns, marries her and in secret she bears a child whom she sends back home with her husband until she is able to join them.

These departures from the original ballad, however, are minor. What is significant is that Fa Mulan is clearly a victor in every possible way: on the spiritual as well as physical planes, in both the traditionally male and female spheres of action. She has developed mystical powers as well as military prowess and is both a successful warrior, as well as a wife and mother.

The no-name aunt and Fa Mulan, both introduced to Kingston by her mother, represent the polar extremes of social behavior available to a woman: the victim aunt was obviously the example to avoid; the victorious Mulan, a model to follow. But how, Maxine as a girl wondered, was one to be a woman warrior in the United States, especially when one was so shy among Caucasians that one never said a word and was told she had an I.Q. of zero? Where was one's village to defend? Who were the tyrants and villains? How was a Chinamerican girl to reconcile the stories of her mother's Cantonese past with the realities of her Stockton, California present and forge a harmonious identity out of these conflicting forces?

Kingston raises these questions but does not answer them directly. Instead, she continues with her stories, and in all of them the victor / victim theme is evident. The author's mother, Brave Orchid, is clearly cut from the heroic, even a mythic stamp, a victor in many ways. She is described in terms of hardness and strength, with "eyes strong as boulders," unsmiling in her photographs, with no time for frivolities "My mother is not soft ... does not have smiling eyes ... has not learned to place decorations and phonograph needles." Finding that her husband in America does not send for her year after year, though he continues to send her money, she decides to use the money to put herself through a two-year medical school and she becomes one of thirty seven graduates out of an entering class of one hundred and twelve. At medical school, Brave Orchid earns a reputation for being naturally brilliant, by studying in secret, and for courage by successfully exorcising a ghost that terrified all the women in the dormitory. As a doctor, she is committed, hardworking, respected, fearless, delivering monsters without blinking an eye. Finally joining her husband in the United States, she incredibly bore six children after the age of forty-five and worked in the family laundry from 6:30 A.M. to midnight. After the laundry was torn down through urban renewal, even though she could have retired on social security, she worked in the fields, picking tomatoes and potatoes.... Brave Orchid was indeed well-named, and her victorious exploits and accomplishments are a modern equivalent of Fa Mulan's.

Her sister, Moon Orchid, was, by contrast, a victim. In the chapter called "At the Western Palace," at Brave Orchid's insistence and with her savings, Moon Orchid comes from Hong Kong to the United States to reclaim her "rightful" position as the first wife of her long-estranged, now remarried husband. By old Chinese custom, the husband and all his wives could live under the same roof, with the first wife having preeminence and authority.

In America, of course, this cannot be. Brave Orchid's interference in her sister's affairs results in Moon Orchid's humiliation, madness and finally her death. Moon Orchid is a woman in the oldfashioned Chinese mold, having lived a soft life, in a sense by reflected light, on the money sent her from America by this straying husband, she cannot adapt to the American ways of independence and self-assertion, of doing everything for herself, of abandoning the past. She cannot face the shock of harsh reality and her mind gives way.

With all the female models from the distant past and recent history established, Kingston moves on to her own story, showing the ignorance, the bafflement, the conflicts, the self denigration, the stifling she suffered growing up female and Chinamerican under the smothering wings of a strong, willful mother. In this section, the voice becomes the central symbol of identity and power. Those with voices and stories to tell, like her mother, are powerful; those without, herself as a child, are powerless.

Throughout her childhood, Kingston believed that her mother had cut her frenum. When Kingston identified with her mother, she was proud: "Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me." When considering her personal situation, however, Kingston feared that she had suffered the female equivalent of castration: "At other times I was terrified- the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue." Her mother said she did it to loosen her tongue, to allow it to move in all directions, in any language, but the effect was just the opposite: Maxine became tongue-tied. When she began school and had to speak English for the first time, she became silent. And even today, as an adult, though she admits she is getting better, she says, "A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two." Her silence was so complete that for three years she even covered all her drawings in a layer of black paint, like a discreet curtain over her privacy. When she found out she was supposed to talk, school became a misery. "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl." In Chinese school, from 5 to 7:30 P.M. every day, she and the other girls had no difficulty talking, even screaming and yelling. The problem was only with English, the language of the "foreign ghosts," and was most acute in the early years of school when her mother's influence was strongest.

In the last chapter, "A Song For a Barbarian Reed Pipe" Kingston tells the painful story of her bullying another twelve-year-old Chinamerican classmate whom she hated for being so quiet, so clean, so soft ... so much like the model set up for herself. Kingston tries to force the girl to speak up but though she pinches her, pulls her hair, and screams at her, the girl does nothing but cry and will not say a word. The author's own exasperation and self-hatred are vented on this unfortunate classmate but to no avail except to leave Kingston guilty and bed-ridden for the next eighteen months. In this case, the victim was the victor.

In the final episode of the book, Kingston retells a story of a Chinese poetess Ts'ai Yen, born in 175 A.D. who at 20 was kidnapped by a raiding nomadic tribe. She lived twelve years with these barbarians and bore two children who did not speak Chinese but only imitated her sounds and laughed. The only music these people had were crude flutes they attached to their arrows, which sang in flight. One night she heard the flutes,

"yearning toward a high note, which they found at last and held-an icicle in the desert" and she began to sing: "a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering." In finding her voice and singing the stories of her own past, in creating art out of history, the victim Ts'ai Yen, exiled and alone amidst strangers, became a victor. Her children no longer laughed at her but learned her words and sang with her.

In writing *The Woman Warrior,* of course, Maxine Hong Kingston finds and exercises her voice and makes, out of the ghosts of her past— the stories her mother filled and confused her with in childhood—a work of art, a song that becomes "an icicle in the desert," an ephemeral, unlikely, unexpected event. Though "barbarians" may not understand the language, they can understand the emotions behind this song. The ethnicity that was once a handicap, that set her apart from the others, that made her feel inferior and strange is at the same time her heritage, her treasure, and her strength.

The same mother that humiliated her by sending her out to demand candy to "rectify" the drugstore's "crime" of making a wrong delivery of medicine (thus bringing illness to the house, according to her mother's way of thinking) is also the source of all these beautiful Chinese legends of feminine valor and courage, resourcefulness and pride. The same mother that tells her that girls were sold as slaves in China and that "it is more profitable to feed geese than daughters" is also the woman who put herself through medical school, who studied while the other students slept, who fearlessly delivered monsters.

The mother who filled her life with ghosts from the past and made ghosts of her present ("mailman ghost," "garbage collector ghosts," etc.) was also the one who dared to spend a night in the haunted room and who, with considerable effort, exorcised a ghost that had terrified the entire dormitory.

Throughout the book, Maxine Hong Kingston contrasts her strong, dominant, and domineering mother's talk-story, and her own inability to talk. The belief that her mother had actually cut her frenum, is the powerlessness she suffered in relation to this powerful mother. The book's impetus is the daughter's need to separate herself from her mother, to stand apart, to be her own person, to find her own voice, to reveal her own power. Giving voice to the prodigal aunt's experience in the opening chapter is to assert not only the aunt's existence but Kingston's own. That Kingston's voice is finally so much entangled with her mother's talkstory is inevitable, for most of the stories are the ones her mother told her, embellished by her own imagination. Modestly, Kingston in a 1977 interview [with Nan Robertson, "Ghosts of Girlhood Lift Obscure Book to Peak of Acclaim," *New York Times,* February 12, 1977] said, "My mother is the creative one-the one with the visions and the stories to tell. I'm the technician. She's the great inspiration. I never realized it until I finished the book." However, the final story of Ts'ai Yen is an act of collaboration, which Kingston acknowledges thus, "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine."

The Woman Warrior itself is the reconciliation between daughter as victim and mother as victor, but it is simultaneously an acceptance of a difficult past when mother may also be seen as a victim of sorts, crippled in the New World by outdated customs and out-of-place reactions from the Old World. The book is an assertion of the daughter's victory through the printed word despite the tongue whose frenum was cut, as though the voice that was dammed up for so many childhood years had suddenly broken through. Recounting so many of her mother's stories, the author is recognizing her indebtedness, and making of her book an offering of love and peace not only to her mother but to the world. Between the poles of woman as victim and as victor, as humiliated and as heroic, as voiceless and as singer, Maxine Hong Kingston makes her place. *The Woman Warrior* is the record of her struggle to come to terms with all the elements of her Chinese background and their uneasy, often conflicting, relationship to her American self. The resolution is finally the realization that the very elements which made her a "victim" in this society are also the elements that, by her giving them voice and shape and beauty, now make her a "victor." ...

Source: Amy Ling, "Thematic Threads in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,"* in *Tamkang Review,* Vol. XIV, Nos. 1-4, Autumn, 1983-Summer, 1984, pp. 155-164.

Adaptations

Kingston reads *The Woman Warrior* on an audio cassette entitled *Maxine Hong Kingston Reading The Woman Warrior [and] China Men (Excerptsaudio Cassette).* American Audio Prose Library produced the tape in June 1987.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast the Chinese tradition of "talking story" to traditions of oral storytelling in other cultures. Describe the relative importance of the tradition in various cultures and explain the purposes the tradition serves for different peoples.

Research the history of Chinese immigration in the United States. When did it begin? For what reasons did the Chinese leave their own country? Where are the largest populations of Chinese in the United States? How have they adapted to this culture?

Explore the history of Chinese laundries in the United States. Why did many Chinese immigrants find employment in this particular industry?

Read about the role of women in China. Compare and contrast the role of women in China to the role of women in the United States.

In the novel *The Woman Warrior,* Kingston recalls her early years in school, particularly her kindergarten year when teachers were disturbed by her black paintings and her silence. Assume the role of a child psychologist and offer an informed opinion of her reasons for these actions. Then, prescribe a course of action for the teachers and her parents.

Take Kingston's position and defend your silence and black paintings. Defend your actions from the viewpoint of your life experiences and their contributions toward making you the successful adult you now are.

Compare and Contrast

6th Century BC-1911 AD: Confinement and oppression of Chinese women abounds.

1912-1928: Last Chinese monarchy ends. Sun Yat-sen and his successor Yuan Shikai attempt to restore monarchy and are rivaled by warlords.

1917-1921: Revolution in Chinese thought and culture known as the May Fourth Movement. Also, Marxism arrives in China and the Chinese Communist Party begins with Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) in attendance.

1921-1927: Chinese Nationalists (Kuomintang) and Russian Communists join forces.

1925: Chiang Kai-shek takes over military command of Kuomintang.

1937: Japanese invasion of China.

1937-1945: Rapid growth of the Chinese Communist Party, with Mao a national leader. Many Chinese come to the United States under a new immigration law that permits 105 Chinese per year to enter.

1949: People's Republic of China forms with Mao Zedong as chairman.

1965: The Chinese immigration quota is abolished.

1966-1969: The Chinese Cultural Revolution is led by Mao to destroy the liberal elements in China.

What Do I Read Next?

China Men follows Kingston's *The Woman Warrior.* While Kingston actually started this book prior to *The Woman Warrior,* Knopf did not publish it until 1980. *China Men* tells stories of Kingston's male ancestors. Kingston wrote this book to restore her Chinese family history and to take a new look at it in relation to American history.

Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey,* published by Knopf in 1989, continues her mix of Chinese mythology with fiction. The main character, Wittman Ah-Sing, is a fifth-generation Californian, Berkeley graduate, and playwright who "trips" his way from city to city trying to create his own theatre. In his drug-induced state, he imitates the Monkey King from Chinese mythology. Critics recognize this book for its diverse use of language.

The Joy Luck Club, published by Putnam's Sons in 1989, is a story written by Chinese-American author Amy Tan. The book tells the stories of four Chinese-American daughters and their relationships with their Chinese mothers. These stories provide a good basis for comparison with Kingston's female characters in *The Woman Warrior.*

Amy Tan's second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife,* was published by Putnam in 1991. This book deals with female-female relationships and the effects Chinese male tradition and abuse can have on those relationships.

The Chinese sister in Amy Tan's 1996 novel, *The Hundred Secret Senses,* convinces her American-born sister that she can communicate with the dead. The "ghosts" in this book evoke images of the "ghosts" in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior.*

Further Study

Frank Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature,* edited by Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, Meridian, 1991, pp. 1-92.

Chin criticizes Kingston for demeaning Chinese culture by altering traditional Chinese myths and by writing an autobiography, which he does not consider an "authentically Chinese" genre.

Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience, and Self-Perception in Twentieth- Century China,* Zed Books, 1995.

This book addresses the raising of Chinese daughters through and across generations before, during, and after the Revolution. Combining case-study accounts with historical data, the author describes growing up across gender-related and cultural boundaries.

Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China,* Cambridge University Press, 1996.

The author traces Chinese traditions from prehistory through modern times, focusing on the arts, culture, economics, foreign policy, emigration, and politics. Of particular interest is the author's discussion of Chinese society's treatment of women.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Women in Society," in Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia [CD-ROM], Grolier Interactive, Inc., 1998.

The author explains Chinese women's lowly position in society through the early twentieth century. She notes, in particular, women's relationships with their husbands and their husbands' families, and describes the effects of their low status.

Yan Gao, *The Art of Parody: Maxine Hong Kingston's Use of Chinese Sources (Many Voices: Ethnic Literatures of the Americas, Vol. 2),* Peter Lang Publishing, 1996.

This author provides an analysis of Kingston's use of Chinese sources in her novels, focusing on the advantage Kingston's bicultural upbringing brings to her unique observations of Chinese and American traditions.

Donn V. Hart, "Foot Binding," in Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia [CD-ROM], Grolier Interactive, Inc., 1998. Hart gives a vivid description of the Chinese tradition of foot binding, explaining its purposes as well as the process.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, "'Growing with Stories': Chinese American Identities, Textual Identities," in *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures: Nineteen Essays,* edited by John R. Maitino and David R. Peck, University of New Mexico Press, 1996, pp. 273-91.

Lim offers a useful analysis of the themes and structure of Kingston's autobiography before discussing approaches to teaching the book.

Paul Mandelbaum, "Rising from the Ashes: A Profile of Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Poets and Writers,* Vol. 26, no. 3, May/June, 1998, pp. 46-53.

An article detailing Kingston's life and work, including the 156-page manuscript she lost when her Oakland home burned to the ground. Mandelbaum praises Kingston's ability to travel "deep into the borderland that encompasses both fact and fantasy."

Paul Outka, "Publish or Perish: Food, Hunger, and Self- Construction in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior," in Contemporary Literature,* Vol. 38, no. 3, Fall, 1997, pp. 447-82.

Outka traces Kingston's search for selfhood and its connection to the theme of hunger in the book.

Tracy Robinson, "The Intersections of Gender, Class, Race, and Culture: On Seeing Clients Whole," in *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development,* Vol. 21, no. 1, January, 1993, pp. 50-58.

This article relates identity formation to the effects of a person's race, culture, and class.

Malini Schueller, "Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in *The Woman Warrior,"* in Criticism, Vol. 31, 1989, pp. 421-37.

Schueller commends Kingston for her unique form of autobiography and for questioning simple definitions of female and ethnic identities.

Sidonie Smith, "Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior:* Filiality and Woman's Autobiographical Storytelling," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism,* edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Rutgers University Press, 1997, pp. 1117-37.

Smith praises Kingston's work for capturing the connection between gender and genre in autobiography and calling *The Woman Warrior "* an autobiography about women's autobiographical story telling."

Howard J. Wechsler, "History of China," in Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia [CD-ROM], Grolier Interactive, Inc., 1998.

The author provides a detailed description of China's history from its earliest days through modern times. Of particular importance to this novel are the author's discussions of the Nationalist Movement, the Chinese Communists, and the Kuomintang.

Gayle Wurst, "Cultural Stereotypes and the Language of Identity: Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle,* Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior,* and Alice Walker's *The*

Color Purple," in *Cross-Cultural Studies: American, Canadian, and European Literatures: 1945-1985,* edited by Mirko Jurak, Filozofska Fakulteta (Yugoslavia), 1988, pp. 53-64.

Wurst compares Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* with Atwood's *Lady Oracle and Walker's The Color Purple,* noting that in all three works the narrator strives to break down cultural stereotypes.

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Maxine Hong Kingston, "At the Western Palace," *The Woman Warrior,* Vintage International, 1989, p. 160.

William McPherson, review in *Washington Post Book World,* October 10, 1976.

Timothy Pfaff, review in *New York Times Book Review,* November 7, 1976.

Pin-chia Feng, "Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 173: American Novelists Since World War II, Fifth Series,* Gale Research, 1996, pp. 84-97.

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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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