

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

Book Information

Amy Tan, The Joy Luck Club
Quiz Number: 7111
Vintage Books, 1991
ISBN 0-679-72768-X; LCCN
288 Pages
Book Level: 5.7
Interest Level: UG

This book chronicles the lives of four Chinese women, their forty-year friendship, and how the death of one brings her daughter into the fold and creates a new understanding for each.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; National Book Award/ Honors

Topics: Family Life, Daughters; Family Life, Death; Family Life, Mothers; Interpersonal Relationships, Friendship; People, Children; People, Chinese American; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

An-mei Hsu member of the Joy Luck Club, whose mother was the concubine of a wealthy man

An-mei's mother fourth wife of Wu Tsing, who kills herself to frighten Wu Tsing into giving An-mei a future

Canning Woo Jing-mei's father, who accompanies her to China to see her sisters

Chwun Yu and Chwun Hwa Suyuan's twin daughters

Harold Lena's "bad" husband, who treats Lena more like a business partner than a wife

Jing-mei (June) Woo Suyuan's American-born daughter, who takes her place in the Joy Luck Club and goes to China to meet her twin sisters

Lena St. Clair Ying-ying's daughter

Lindo Jong member of the Joy Luck club who fulfills an arranged marriage to keep honor for her family

Popo An-mei's grandmother

Rich Schields Waverly's fiance, who unintentionally insults Lindo by criticizing her cooking

Rose Hsu Jordan daughter of An-Mei

Second Wife devious concubine of Wu Tsing

Suyuan Woo the founder of the Joy Luck Club, who dies before she can be reunited with her twin daughters

Ted Jordan Rose's husband, who wants a divorce from Rose

Tin Jong Lindo's husband

Tyan-yu Lindo's first husband, who was chosen by the matchmaker

Waverly Jong daughter of Lindo, who becomes the national chess champion at the age of nine

Wu Tsing wealthy husband of An-mei's mother

Ying-ying St. Clair member of the Joy Luck club who is able to see bad things before they happen

Vocabulary

concubine in certain societies that allow the practice of having more than one spouse at a time, a secondary wife, usually of inferior legal and social status

kowtow to kneel and touch the forehead to the ground in expression of deep respect, worship, or submission

li a Chinese measure of distance measuring about one-third of a mile

mah jong a game of Chinese origin in which tiles, resembling dominoes and bearing various designs, are drawn and discarded until one player wins with a hand of four combinations of three tiles each and a pair of matching tiles

palanquin an east Asian covered litter or couch that is carried on poles on the shoulders of two or more men

rickshaw a small two wheeled carriage drawn by one or two persons

yin and yang the passive female and active masculine cosmic principles in Chinese dualistic philosophy

Synopsis

The Joy Luck Club is a collection of sixteen vignettes that alternate between the lives of four Chinese women, who make up the San Francisco

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Joy Luck Club

by

Amy Tan

Joy Luck Club, and the lives of their four American-born daughters.

The first Joy Luck Club is formed by Suyuan during the Chinese-Japanese War. It is a meeting of four women to play mah jong, feast, escape their problems, and hope for good luck. During the war, Suyuan is forced to leave twin babies on the side of the road, hoping someone will care for them. After the war, she is unable to find her daughters and discovers her husband has died. She remarries and moves to San Francisco, where she forms a new version of the club with An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair. The club meets for decades.

Suyuan's daughters are found, but she dies before she can meet them. Her American-born daughter, Jing-mei, takes her place in the club and is asked to go to China to meet her sisters. When Jing-mei wonders what she could tell the sisters about their mother, the club members question their own connections with their daughters. The vignettes that follow reveal the mothers' difficult pasts, their attempts to raise daughters with American opportunities and Chinese character, the daughters' hesitance to accept their Chinese heritage, and the strength of the mother-daughter bond.

When An-mei is a little girl in the early 1900s, she is forbidden to speak her mother's name. Her mother had fallen into disgrace when she became a concubine after her husband's death. After her grandmother's death, An-mei chooses to live with her mother. She learns her mother was trapped into becoming a concubine, when Wu Tsing's second wife set her up to be raped by him. Second Wife had also claimed her mother's son as her own. Having no position for herself, An-mei's mother kills herself before the Chinese new year to scare Wu Tsing and the Second Wife into giving An-mei a future. Years later, after moving to the United States, An-mei loses her faith in God when her youngest son drowns, and she empowers her daughter Lena to speak up for herself during a divorce settlement.

As a young girl, Lindo Jong frees herself from an arranged marriage by tricking her mother-in-law into

believing her ancestors oppose the marriage. Years later, her American-born daughter Waverly becomes the national chess champion at the age of nine. Lindo is ashamed when she sees that Waverly is embarrassed by her. Waverly sees her mother as the opponent and eventually gives up chess. When Waverly is grown, she worries her mother will poison her view of her fiance Rich as she did with her previous husband. Lindo eventually accepts him and as they prepare for the wedding, she sees a new strength in Waverly. Lindo wonders what she has given up and what she has gained by becoming American.

Ying-ying grows up as the daughter of wealthy parents. When she is sixteen, she marries a man and becomes pregnant with his son. He leaves her for another woman, and she aborts the baby. When her husband dies, she marries an American man and moves to the United States. She surrenders her chi, her spirit, and becomes withdrawn, like an unseen spirit. Ying-ying can see the bad that is ahead. She predicts that her daughter will marry a bad man and that her own son will be stillborn. Years later, her daughter, Lena, is unnoticed and unappreciated by her husband Harold. Ying-ying cuts her spirit loose and prepares to warn Lena.

In the final vignette, Jing-mei travels to China with her father. She meets her sisters, and she understands the part of her that is Chinese is in her blood and her family.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What is the Joy Luck Club? Why was it started?

The Joy Luck Club is a meeting of four women to play mah jong, feast, and tell stories. Suyuan starts the club to escape the miseries of war. The club members put all bad thoughts out of their heads and they focus on their luck and good fortune.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Joy Luck Club

by
Amy Tan

Literary Analysis

What are the meanings of the names Chwun Yu, Chwun Hwa, and Jing-mei? Explain the significance of those names.

Chwun Yu means Spring Rain, and Chwun Hwa means Spring Flower. The twins' names reflected the order of their birth, since rain comes before flowers. Jing-mei's name means Essential Younger Sister. Her name symbolizes Suyuan's cherished wish that her daughters be brought together. Ironically, Suyuan's name means Long Cherished Wish.

Inferential Comprehension

Why does An-mei's mother kill herself three days before the lunar new year?

It is a cultural belief that a person's soul comes back to settle scores three days after that person died. It is also a belief that all debts need to be paid on the lunar new year or disaster would follow. Wu Tsing is afraid of ghosts. He also knows he had been cruel to An-mei's mother. By timing her death so her soul would come back on the first day of the lunar new year, An-mei's mother guarantees Wu Tsing would honor her children, to avoid disaster.

Constructing Meaning

After Lindo has her hair done by Mr. Rory, she wonders what she has gained and lost by coming to America. What had Lindo gained and lost?

Lindo gains opportunities for herself and for Waverly. When Lindo came to America, women had few opportunities in China. They did not share an equal social status with men and their worth was determined by their husbands. Because there are so many choices in America, Lindo feels she lost the ability to teach her daughter to have Chinese character, for example, how to obey her parents, how to hide her feelings to take advantage of opportunities, and how to understand her own worth.

Understanding the Author's Craft In the introduction to the first section of the book, a woman plans to give her daughter a swan - a creature that became more than what was hoped for. When the swan is taken away, the single feather becomes the symbol of her good intentions. Special keepsakes are often passed from one generation to the next. Talk about items the students or their parents may have received from family members from previous generations. Discuss the significance of these items. Ask the students to write a paragraph describing an item they might want to pass on to their children someday. The item does not have to be something they have right now. It could be something they cherish, or it could be something that symbolizes their life. Ask them to explain their reasons for choosing the item.

Comparing and Contrasting Lindo had hoped to raise her daughter with American opportunities and Chinese character. China offers few opportunities for women when she lived there. Women are expected to swallow their "selfish" dreams and their sorrows. A woman's worth is determined by her husband. Research women's roles in present day China. How have women's roles changed? Research the changing roles of women in America as well. Compare the roles of women in American and China.

Comparing and Contrasting The mothers in this story found it difficult to adapt to a new culture. Invite a person who has immigrated to this country to speak to the class, or ask the students to interview a person who has made a cultural change. Ask questions about the culture of their homeland, that culture's views on family relationships, their reasons for moving, how their experiences in this country compared with their expectations, the problems they've had or still have in adjusting to a new culture, the advantages and disadvantages of each culture, and how they've taught or plan to teach their children about the culture of their homeland. Compare the students' interviews in class and lead a discussion about cultural diversity. Many immigrants came to America through Ellis Island.

Teachable Skills

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

There are many resources available to aid the study of immigration through Ellis Island, including documented first-hand accounts of the immigrants' experiences. Study these resources.

Responding to Literature Suyuan forms the Kweilin Joy Luck club to escape the miseries of war. As a fun activity, create a Joy Luck club in the classroom. Teach the students how to play mah jong or substitute a game with which they are familiar. Sample Chinese foods and find interesting Chinese stories to read. Remember that the purpose of the club is to put all bad thoughts aside and focus on luck and good fortune!