

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Joy Luck Club

by Amy Tan

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Notes

The Joy Luck Club explores the lives of several Chinese women, who have immigrated to the United States, and their relationships with their Americanized daughters. The novel teaches the reader about Chinese culture and heritage, but the experiences between the mothers and daughters also have a universal quality which can be shared by people of any culture. The book is divided into four parts, composed of sixteen vignettes. The themes of the novel are woven into these events through parables, and recurring images.

All references are from the Penguin Books edition of *The Joy Luck Club*, copyright 1989.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the following themes from the novel:
 - It is important for a woman to develop her individual identity so she has the strength to survive hard times.
 - Because they operate from different perspectives, it is frequently difficult for Americanized daughters to communicate with their Chinese mothers, though they share a great bond.
 - The way things appear to be is often different from the way they really are.
 - As they grow older, the daughters appreciate their mothers and begin to see how similar they are to their mothers.
2. point out the significance of titles including: the title of the novel, the titles of the four parts of the novel, and the titles of each of the sixteen vignettes.
3. discuss Chinese beliefs and culture presented in the story including:
 - the importance of elements like wood, water, and fire to define character traits
 - types of food the Chinese families enjoy
 - proper dinner time etiquette
 - importance of birth year to predict personality traits (e.g., horse, tiger).
4. define the following Chinese words and phrases:
chaswei - sweet barbecued pork;
hulihudu, heimongmong - confused, dark fog;
chunvang chilhan - If the lips are gone the teeth will be cold. Or - One thing is always the result of another;
no shou - no respect for ancestors.
5. comment on the following recurring images which appear throughout the novel
 - wind as an image of strength and power
 - “ghosts” as images of invisibility or disgrace
6. discuss what each of the following items might represent in the story: gold bracelets, a crooked nose, shadow, red candle, Moon Lady, Twenty-six Malignant Gates, swan’s feather, mah jong table, Bible, weeds in the garden, jade pendant, pearl necklace, black vase.
7. define a myth and discuss whether or not the story of the Moon Lady is a myth.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What lessons do each of the four introductory parables teach?
2. Assume you are attending a Chinese dinner party. List the rules of proper etiquette you need to follow. Briefly describe some of the dishes that might be served.
3. Discuss the ways the mah jong table relates to the overall structure of the novel.
4. Research the twelve animals represented in the Chinese zodiac. Briefly list the personality characteristics that a person born in each of those years might possess.
5. Identify two stories in this novel which feature the wind as an image of personal strength and identity.
6. How do the gold bracelets, swan's feather, weeds in the garden, and jade pendant all help to illustrate the following theme: "It is important for a woman to develop her individual identity so she has the strength to survive hard times."
7. For what reasons might the story *Moon Lady* be labeled a myth? In what ways does this story help to illustrate the theme that appearances often differ from reality.
8. Why is An-mei's mother considered to be a ghost? What additional story in the book refers to a character as a ghost?
9. What does it mean to have no *shou*? Which of the four parts of this novel illustrates the Chinese belief that it is important for children to avoid disgracing their family?
10. For what reasons does An-mei keep the white Bible under the table leg?
11. In what ways do the titles *Without Wood* and *Double Face* help to illustrate one of the main themes in the novel? Select two more titles and discuss which theme they help to illustrate.
12. Lena is fascinated by the story of the Chinese man who is sentenced to be tortured to death. What is the "greatest torture of all" for Lena St. Clair in her life?
13. Name the story from the novel that illustrates the following generalization about life: "Life's rules must be discovered for oneself; they can not be taught."
14. How does Waverly exhibit "invisible strength" when she is playing chess? Compare Waverly with her mother. Who do you think best understands the art of invisible strength? Cite incidents from the novel to support your answer.

The Joy Luck Club

PART I: FEATHERS FROM A THOUSAND LI AWAY

1. A parable is a tale which illustrates a lesson or moral. What lesson does the story of the swan teach?

2. In what ways does the parable at the beginning of this chapter help to support the following theme?

It is important for a woman to develop her individual identity so she has the strength to survive hard times.

3. Some critics believe the swan feather stands for something larger than itself. What do you think the swan feather might represent in this story?

The Moon Lady: Ying-Ying St. Clair (Mother) Lena St. Clair (Daughter)

VOCABULARY

acrid – bitter

apparition – a ghostly figure

brigands – robbers or bandits

chafing – rubbing

lament – an audible grievance; a wail

listlessness – lacking emotion or interest

presumptuous – excessively forward; going beyond what is considered proper

pungent – a sharp, strong, penetrating smell

remorse – bitter regret

unfurled – spread or opened out

wantonness – wildness; unrestraint; a surrender of inhibitions

1. Why do you think Amah makes up the story of the five evils when Ying-Ying asks about the stink from the burning incense?

2. What is the definition of a secret wish? Why is the Moon Lady special?

3. Why does Ying-Ying love her shadow? What do you think the shadow might represent in this story?

PART III: AMERICAN TRANSLATION

1. What is peach-blossom luck?

2. Briefly state the moral or lesson this parable is teaching. Notice the phrase “twice-used Macy’s bag” and compare it to the lush condominium large enough for a fancy armoire.

Magpies: An-Mei Hsu (Mother) Rose Hsu Jordon (Daughter)

VOCABULARY

docile – submissive

impertinent – improperly bold or forward

kowtowed – kneeled and touched the forehead to the ground as a sign of respect

prestige – public distinction; high standing

simpering – smiling in a coy or self-conscious way

spinsters – single women who are older than the conventional age for marriage

wet nurse – a woman who nurses another woman's child

1. The moral of the story about the turtle is "...it is useless to cry. Your tears do not wash away your sorrows. They feed someone else's joy." How does this moral or lesson apply to Rose's divorce from Ted described in the story, *Without Wood*?

2. State a generalization about life An-mei learns from the big wooden clock.

3. Why does An-mei's mother insist An-mei wear the pearl necklace for one week?
