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**AMY TAN'S THE JOY
LUCK CLUB**



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THE JOY LUCK CLUB

NOTES

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- *Life and Background*
- *Introduction to the Novel*
- *List of Characters*
- *Critical Commentaries*
- *Genealogy*
- *Map*
- *Glossaries*
- *Critical Essays*
- *Review Questions and Essay Topics*
- *Selected Bibliography*

by

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Centerspread: Genealogy

THE JOY LUCK CLUB

Notes

LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

Amy Tan, whose Chinese name, An-mei, means "blessing from America," was born in 1952 in Oakland, California, the middle child and only daughter of John and Daisy Tan, who came to America from China in the late 1940s. Besides Amy, the Tans also had two sons—Peter, born in 1950, and John, born in 1954.

The family moved nearly every year, living in Oakland, Fresno, Berkeley, and San Francisco before settling in Santa Clara, California. Although John and Daisy rarely socialized with their neighbors, Amy and her brothers ignored their parents' objections and tried hard to fit into American society. "They wanted us to have American circumstances and Chinese character," Tan said in an interview with Elaine Woo in the *Los Angeles Times* (March 12, 1989).

Young Amy was deeply unhappy with her Oriental appearance and heritage. She was the only Chinese girl in class from the third grade until she graduated from high school. She remembers trying to belong and feeling frustrated and isolated. "I felt ashamed of being different and ashamed of feeling that way," she remarked in a *Los Angeles Times* interview. In fact, she was so determined to look like an American girl that she even slept with a clothespin on her nose, hoping to slim its Asian shape. By the time Amy was a teenager, she had rejected everything Chinese. She even felt ashamed of eating "horrible" five-course Chinese meals and decided that she would grow up to look more American if she ate more "American" foods. "There is this myth," she said, "that America is a melting pot, but what happens in assimilation is that we end up deliberately choosing the American things—hot dogs and apple pie—and ignoring the Chinese offerings." (*Newsweek*, April 17, 1989)

Amy's parents had high expectations for her success. They

decided that she would be a full-time neurosurgeon and part-time concert pianist. But they had not reckoned with her rebellious streak. Ever since she won an essay contest when she was eight years old, Amy dreamed of writing novels and short stories. Her dream seemed unlikely to become reality, however, after a series of tragedies shook her life. When Amy was fifteen years old, her older brother Peter and her father each died of brain tumors within the same year. Deciding that the remaining family needed to escape from the site of their tragedy, Daisy settled with Amy and her brother in Montreux, Switzerland.

The move intensified Amy's rebellion. "I did a bunch of crazy things," she told Elaine Woo. "I just kind of went to pieces." Perhaps the most dangerous was her relationship with an older German man who had close contacts with drug dealers and organized crime. Daisy had the man arrested for drug possession and got her daughter hauled before the authorities. Amy quickly severed all ties with the German.

A year later, Daisy, Amy, and John returned to San Francisco. In 1969, Amy enrolled in Linfield College, a small Baptist university in McMinnville, Oregon. Daisy selected the college because she believed it to be a safe haven for her daughter. A year later, however, Amy followed Louis DeMattei, her Italian-American boyfriend, to San Jose City College in California. Just as distressing to Daisy, Amy changed her major from pre-med to English and linguistics. (Daisy was so upset that she and her daughter did not speak to each other for six months.)

Amy then transferred to San Jose State University and earned a B.A. in English and an M.A. in linguistics. After completing her degrees, Amy married DeMattei, a tax attorney. Still not certain what path to pursue, she entered a doctoral program in linguistics at the University of California at Santa Cruz and at Berkeley, but left in 1976 to become a language-development consultant for the Alameda County Association for Retarded Citizens. It was not until the early 1980s that she became a business writer.

As with all fairy tales, *The Joy Luck Club* had an unlikely beginning. Tan's business writing venture was so successful that she was able to buy her mother a house. Yet, despite her happiness at being able to provide for her mother, she was not fulfilled in her work. "I measured my success by how many clients I had and how many bill-

able hours I had," she told interviewer Jonathan Mandell. Secretly, Tan had always wanted to write fiction, but she had thrown herself so completely into her freelance career that she spent more than ninety hours a week at it. Early in 1985, Tan began to worry that she was devoting too much time to her business and started looking for a change. She decided to force herself to do another kind of writing. The turning point came a year later, when Tan's mother was hospitalized after a heart attack. "I decided that if my mother was okay, I'd get to know her. I'd take her to China, and I'd write a book." Her only previous forays into fiction were "vacation letters written to friends in which I tried to create little stories based on things that happened while I was away," she noted.

The same year, Tan wrote a short story, "Endgame," about a brilliant young chess champion who has a difficult relationship with her overprotective Chinese mother. Tan expanded the story into a collection, and it was sold to the prestigious publisher G.P. Putnam. Because of her huge advance—\$50,000—Tan dissolved her freelance business and completed the volume, which she named *The Joy Luck Club*. "I wrote it very quickly because I was afraid this chance would just slip out of my hands," she told Elaine Woo. She completed the manuscript in May 1988, and the book was published the following year. The book was greeted with almost universal acclaim. "Magical," said fellow novelist Louise Erdrich; " . . . intensely poetic and moving," echoed *Publishers Weekly*. "She has written a jewel of a book," Orville Schell concluded in the *New York Times* (March 19, 1989).

In April 1989, *The Joy Luck Club* made the *New York Times*' best-seller list, where it remained for seven months. Tan was named a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction and National Book Critics Circle Award. She received the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award. Paperback rights for the novel sold for more than \$1.23 million, and it has been translated into seventeen languages, including Chinese.

The phenomenal success of *The Joy Luck Club* and the unfamiliar rituals of being a celebrity made it difficult for Tan to concentrate on writing her second novel. At one time, writing it became such a challenge that she broke out in hives. She began seven different novels until she hit upon a solution: "When my mother read *The Joy Luck Club*," Tan said, "she was always complaining to me how she

had to tell her friends that, no, she was not the mother or any of the mothers in the book . . . So she came to me one day and she said, 'Next book, tell my true story.'

The Kitchen God's Wife, published in 1991, tells the story of Daisy's life through the fictional Winnie, a refugee from China. The book was a huge success even before publication: in a tightly fought contest, the Literary Guild bought the book club rights for a reported \$425,000. Five foreign publishers bought rights to the novel—all before publication. In 1992, Tan published a children's book, *The Moon Lady*. The plot is taken from the "Moon Lady" episode in *The Joy Luck Club*. "The haunting tale that unfolds is worthy of retelling," *Publishers Weekly* wrote. When not writing, Tan enjoys playing pool. She is a frequent visitor to Family Billiards in San Francisco, the city where she and husband Louis DeMattei live.

A NOTE ABOUT MODERN ASIAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

It was not until the 1976 publication of Maxine Hong Kingston's mystical memoir of her San Francisco childhood, *The Woman Warrior*, that Asian-American writers broke into mainstream American literature. Even so, ten more years had to pass until another Asian-American writer achieved fame and fortune. *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan's first novel, sold an astonishing 275,000 hard-cover copies upon its 1989 publication. The success of Tan's book increased publishers' willingness to gamble on first books by Asian-American writers. Two years later, at least four other Chinese-American writers had brisk-selling books. Gus Lee's *China Boy*, for example, had an initial print run of 75,000, huge for a first-time author. His advance was nearly \$100,000. The Literary Guild purchased the rights to the book; Random House did an audio version with *M. Butterfly*'s B. D. Hong as the reader. Two publishers fought for the right to publish David Wong Louie's *Pang of Love*, a collection of short stories. Gish Jen's *Typical American* is an equally big hit.

At the same time, Japanese-American writers are flourishing. Perhaps not since the literary community "discovered" Jewish-American writers in the 1950s have we experienced such a concentrated ethnic wave. In part, this interest in Asian-American literature can be attributed to the near doubling of America's

Asian-American population, from 3.5 million to 6.9 million in the past ten years. The fact remains, however, that more Asian-Americans are writing, and their books have a fresh and original voice.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL

The Joy Luck Club describes the lives of four Asian women who fled China in the 1940s and their four very Americanized daughters. The novel focuses on Jing-mei (June) Woo, a thirty-six-year-old daughter, who, after her mother's death, takes her place at the meetings of a social group called the Joy Luck Club. As its members play mah jong and feast on Chinese delicacies, the older women spin stories about the past and lament the barriers that exist between their daughters and themselves. Through their stories, Jing-mei comes to appreciate the richness of her heritage.

Suyuan Woo, the founder of the Joy Luck Club, barely escaped war-torn China with her life, and was forced to leave her twin infant daughters behind. Her American-born daughter, Jing-mei "June" Woo, works as a copywriter for a small advertising firm. She lacks her mother's drive and self-confidence, but finds her identity after her mother's death, when she meets her twin half-sisters in China.

An-mei Hsu grew up in the home of the wealthy merchant Wu Tsing. She was without status because her mother was only the fourth wife. After her mother's suicide, An-mei came to America, married, and had seven children. Like Jing-mei Woo, An-mei's daughter Rose is unsure of herself. She is nearly prostrate with grief when her husband, Ted, demands a divorce. After a breakdown, she finds her identity and learns to assert herself.

Lindo Jong was betrothed at infancy to another baby, Tyan-yu. They married as preteens and lived in Tyan-yu's home. There, Lindo was treated like a servant. She cleverly tricked the family, however, and gained her freedom. She came to America, got a job in a fortune cookie factory, met and married Tin Jong. Her daughter, Waverly, was a chess prodigy who became a successful tax accountant.

Ying-ying St. Clair grew up a wild, rebellious girl in a wealthy family. After she married, her husband deserted her, and Ying-ying had an abortion and lived in poverty for a decade. Then she married Clifford St. Clair and emigrated to America. Her daughter, Lena, is on the verge of a divorce from her architect husband, Harold

Livotny. She established him in business and resents their unequal division of finances.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

The Mothers

Suyuan Woo

The central event in Suyuan's life is the loss of her twin baby daughters. In a desperate attempt to save her babies from the Japanese troops advancing through China, Suyuan leaves them by the side of the road. Soon after, she meets her second husband, Canning Woo. They emigrate to America and have a daughter. A strong, resourceful woman, Suyuan never gives up the search for her first two daughters.

An-mei Hsu

An-mei's mother, the wife of a respected scholar, loses all status when her husband dies; she is raped and forced into concubinage by the wealthy Wu Tsing. She kills herself so that An-mei can have freedom. An-mei comes to America, marries, and has seven children. Her youngest child, Bing, drowns in the ocean.

Lindo Jong

Betrothed at infancy to Tyan-yu, Lindo marries him when she is twelve years old, after floods destroy her parents' home. She is treated very badly and finally tricks the family into releasing her from the marriage. She comes to America, gets a job in a fortune cookie factory, meets and marries Tin Jong. They have three children: Winston, Vincent, and Waverly.

Ying-ying St. Clair

Ying-ying grew up a fearless, reckless girl amid great wealth. When her husband leaves her for an opera singer, she has an abortion and lives in poverty for ten years. Then she moves to the city and becomes a shop girl. She meets Clifford St. Clair, and they marry and move to America. He adores her, but she has lost her spirit. She must confront her past in order to regain her sense of self.

The Daughters

Jing-mei "June" Woo

Her mother tries to make her a piano prodigy, but Jing-mei lacks both talent and drive. Now a copywriter for a small advertising firm, Jing-mei is easily humiliated by those who possess greater self-confidence. She finds her identity when she meets her twin half-sisters in China, after her mother's death.

Rose Hsu Jordan

A timid person, Rose is unable to make decisions. Her husband, Ted, leaves her and demands possession of their home. After a breakdown, she comes into her own and learns to assert herself.

Waverly Jong

A childhood chess prodigy, Waverly becomes a successful tax accountant. After the failure of her first marriage, she falls in love with fellow accountant Rich Shields. She has a daughter, Shoshana, from her first marriage.

Lena St. Clair

Lena establishes her husband, Harold Livotny, in his own architectural firm, providing him with seed money and ideas. Eight years later, they are dividing the household expenses equally, although Harold now earns seven times more than Lena does. She is resentful and angry.

Minor Characters

Arnold

A neighborhood boy who teases Lena when they are children, he later dies of measles; Lena feels guilty, linking his death to her unwillingness to finish her daily rice. She develops an eating disorder.

Ted Jordan

Rose Hsu Jordan's husband; a physician; he sues Rose for di-

voice ostensibly because of her inability to make decisions. In reality, he is having an affair with another woman.

Tin Jong

Lindo Jong's husband; Waverly Jong's father.

Harold Livotny

Lena's husband; an architect.

Clifford St. Clair

Ying-ying's husband; Lena's father. A well-meaning man, he nonetheless cannot understand his wife's loneliness and isolation.

Wu Tsing

The wealthy merchant who forces An-mei Hsu's mother into concubinage by raping her.

Popo

An-mei's grandmother. She throws her daughter out of the house because of the disgrace that she brings upon the family.

CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

Part I: Feathers from a Thousand *Li* Away

A brief parable introduces one of the novel's primary themes: transformation. An old woman remembers purchasing an unusual "swan" in a Shanghai market; the swan had originally been a duck, but it stretched its neck so long—trying to become a goose—that it eventually looked exactly like a swan. The old woman took her swan and booked passage on a ship bound for America, and during the journey, she imagined what it would be like to raise a daughter in America. She hoped that her daughter would be valued for herself—and not valued as only a reflection of her husband. She would give her daughter this swan, "a creature that became more than what was hoped for."

In America, immigration officials immediately confiscated the

swan and, in her confusion with all of the official forms and papers to fill out, the woman forgot why she came to America and what she left behind. Many years later, the woman still treasured a single feather from the wondrous swan; she planned to give her daughter this feather—she would do so on the day when she could speak “perfect American English” to her daughter.

Within this parable lies Tan’s ironic treatment of the theme of the American Dream—the belief that America is a guaranteed Land of Opportunity, of success and happiness. An old woman sets off on a journey, certain that this fabled destination will ensure her a fresh start, a place where her daughter can gain respect and accomplish wondrous things, unburdened by the enormous hardships that she herself suffered in the past. In a sense, the woman’s dream comes true: her daughter gains respect, but meantime, she becomes so Americanized—“speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow”—that the two women are unable to communicate with one another.

Inability to communicate because of the generation gap is yet another theme in this novel. On a literal level, the daughter can speak very little Chinese, and her mother’s English is poor. On a figurative level, the daughter grows up without anguish or sorrow, so she cannot understand her mother’s painfully tragic past, and her mother knows no way that she can communicate the depths and the details of her suffering to her sheltered, fortunate daughter. This mother-daughter tension is a key to understanding the lives of the four Chinese mothers and their American daughters, who are the central characters in this novel. Using this tension, Tan explores and reveals the emotional upheaval that results when people’s hopes and expectations are continually thwarted by the realities of their lives.

This prologue, set in *italics*, introduces several of Tan’s literary techniques. Notice, for example, how she constructs her novel by using parallelisms—the repetition of similar elements. Each of the four sections of the novel begins with a brief parable, set in *italics*. In addition, each section contains four separate stories, each of which will parallel one another in various ways.

Tan also uses symbolism—a person, place, or object that stands for, or represents, something beyond itself, such as an abstract idea or feeling. Initially, Tan uses the swan in its traditional fairy-tale sense to symbolize transformation. As the ugly ducking of the fairy

tale matured into a beautiful swan, so the old woman who was degraded by her husband in China hopes that she will be transformed in America into her own person, someone whom her daughter can respect. More important, however, the woman hopes that her daughter will transcend this possibility of gaining respect and be transformed into "a creature that became more than what was hoped for."

Tan now creates her own fairy tale of the duck's becoming a swan. In her version, the duck initially hoped to become a magnificent goose, one that would someday be the centerpiece for a roast goose dinner. Ironically, the duck stretched its neck so long that it resembled more than it hoped for: it resembled a swan. Similarly, the old woman hopes that her daughter will become transformed in America. Ironically, the daughter is transformed—but she is transformed into an Americanized Chinese-American woman, one with whom her mother can no longer communicate. Like the duck, the daughter becomes so changed that her life is forever altered. The swan can never become a duck again; likewise, the daughter of the Chinese immigrant can never again be Chinese—only American. The swan has vanished and its single, remaining feather symbolizes a mother's almost extinguished expectations, the sparse remnants of her hopes and plans to bequeath her fierce optimism and rich Oriental heritage to her daughter.

As with most parables, there is a lesson here: Be careful what you dream. Your dreams may become reality—and more.

Jing-mei Woo: *The Joy Luck Club*

"Before I wrote *The Joy Luck Club*," Tan said in an interview, "my mother told me, 'I might die soon. And if I die, what will you remember?'" Tan's answer appears on the book's dedication page, emphasizing the novel's adherence to truth. How much of the story is real? "All the daughters are fractured bits of me," Tan said in a *Cosmopolitan* interview. Further, Tan has said that the members of the club represent "different aspects of my mother."

When the novel opens, a mother, Suyuan Woo, has died of a cerebral aneurysm, and her husband has asked their thirty-six-year-old daughter, Jing-mei ("June"), to assume her mother's role and take her seat at the next meeting of the Joy Luck Club. Suyuan innovated this particular version of the club long ago—in 1949,

the year she arrived in San Francisco from China. At the First Chinese Baptist Church, she met the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs, and soon she enticed the wives to join with her and form a Joy Luck Club.

In a flashback, we hear Suyuan telling her daughter about the origins of the very first Joy Luck Club, as well as stories from her past. Her first husband, an officer with the Kuomintang, feared an imminent Japanese invasion, so he took her and their two small babies to Kweilin. There, Suyuan created the Joy Luck Club in order to cope with the horrors of war. Each week, four young women met to play mah jong, share a few meager luxuries, and talk about happier times. Because Suyuan's stories about that first Joy Luck Club—especially the endings—change each time she tells them, June discounts them as little more than embroidered, restyled, improvised memories.

One day, however, Suyuan tells her daughter an entirely new story: an army officer arrived at their house in Kweilin and urged Suyuan to escape to Chungking as quickly as possible. The exodus was so effected suddenly and was so grueling that, along the way, she was forced to abandon all her possessions, one by one. Finally, she had to abandon her most precious possessions of all: her two baby daughters. June is stunned. She has two sisters, about whom she knew nothing—until now.

This central episode in this section of the novel is based on truth. In 1967, Tan, her mother Daisy, and her brother John left California for Switzerland. On the eve of their departure, Daisy revealed that somewhere in China, she had three daughters from an earlier marriage—daughters lost to her when political ties were severed between the U.S. and China in 1949. In the novel, Suyuan loses two daughters and does not live long enough to be reunited with them. In real life, however, Tan's mother, Daisy, was reunited with two of her daughters in 1978. Thus, Tan interweaves fact and fiction in the novel, taking truth from her mother's stories while creating a larger canvas for her novel, focusing on two cultures and two generations and the chasm between them. The transformation of truth into dramatic fiction parallels the transformation within each of the four mothers—from being young girls to being old women. The novel also focuses on the transformation of the Chinese daughters into full-fledged Americans. And, of course, Tan's emphasis on com-

munication—and particularly the lack of communication—between the two generations is always present.

The novel, in fact, opens with the concept of communication: Mr. Woo, June's father, believes that his wife died because she could not express herself. Unvoiced ideas, he says, can literally cause death. A few paragraphs farther on, June alludes to the problems that she and her mother had communicating: "I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place."

In "Mother Tongue," an essay in *The Threepenny Review*, Fall 1990, Tan commented on her problems communicating with her mother. "I think my mother's English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life . . . While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be my strong suit . . . for me, at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience."

Tan is too modest. Her novel is rich—especially in figurative language, words and phrases that convey ideas beyond their literal meaning. Tan's most common figures of speech are similes, metaphors, personification, and hyperbole. Many critics have compared her narrative style and her unique voice to the Native American writer Louise Erdrich. Tan recalls reading Erdrich's *Love Medicine* in 1985 and being "so amazed by her voice. It was different and yet it seemed I could identify with the powerful images, the beautiful language and such moving stories." Tan's images are equally powerful. Her metaphor "the peaks looked like giant fried fish trying to jump out of a vat of oil," for example, uses a common food item eaten regularly within a terrifying context in order to convey the horrors of war and to foreshadow the unbearable events that will befall the mother who is forced to abandon her babies by the side of the road.

This section also introduces the theme of identity and heritage. June is ashamed of her heritage, symbolized by the strange clothes that the mothers wear to the Joy Luck Club; June is uncomfortable looking at the "funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts." She imagines that the Joy Luck Club is a "shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for war." However, when June accepts the Joy Luck Club's gift of \$1200, she takes a first step toward fully discovering, accepting, and appreciating her Oriental heritage.