

# Amy Tan in the Classroom

“The art of invisible strength”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



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# Contents



<i>Permission Acknowledgments</i> .....	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	xiii
<i>Introduction</i> .....	xv
<b>1. Where Life and Art Intersect</b> .....	1
<b>2. Thematic Balance in <i>The Joy Luck Club</i></b> .....	19
<b>3. Analyzing the Text: Approaches to Close Reading</b> .....	33
<b>4. Meeting the Challenges of <i>The Joy Luck Club</i></b> .....	50
<b>5. The Art of Film: <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> on Screen</b> .....	67
<b>6. Taking a Critical Stance: Argument and Assessment</b> .....	90
<b>7. Connections and Extensions</b> .....	107
<b>8. More . . .</b> .....	116
<i>Chronology of Amy Tan's Life</i> .....	119
<i>Works Cited</i> .....	123
<i>Authors</i> .....	127

# 1 Where Life and Art Intersect

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When Nick Carraway, the narrator of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic novel *The Great Gatsby*, points out the impossibility of repeating the past, Jay Gatsby “cries incredulously . . . ‘Why of course you can.’” With similar force of will and optimism, Amy Tan’s mother argued that her daughter could change the past—as a writer: “She can change it by telling everybody, telling the world” (Davidson 65). That belief in the transformative power of narrative is the unifying thread in Tan’s life and a place for students to enter her story and the stories she tells.

## **A Chinese and American Childhood**

Tan was born in Oakland, California, in 1952 and grew up in a bicultural and bilingual household, the only daughter and middle child of John and Daisy Tan. Her father emigrated from China in the late 1940s, just before the Communist Revolution. He had worked for the U.S. Information Service and was trained as an electrical engineer, but when he came to the United States, he became a Baptist minister. Tan’s mother had three daughters from an arranged marriage in China, divorced her abusive first husband, and fled to the United States on the last boat to leave Shanghai before the Communist takeover in 1949. After marrying John Tan, she gave birth to her first son, Peter, in 1950 and to John Jr. in 1954.

Tan has spoken about her childhood as characterized by silences about the past. She did not learn of her half sisters until she was an adult, nor about her mother's experiences or those of her grandmother, Jing-mei, the name Tan ultimately chose for the central character of *The Joy Luck Club*. Jing-mei was widowed in the influenza epidemic of 1918 and then raped by a wealthy man who forced her into a life of disgrace as his concubine. She committed suicide in front of her nine-year-old daughter by swallowing raw opium buried in rice cakes. Tan believes that her family history manifests itself in her books as voicelessness and secrets; silence, she says, is "a part of a legacy of . . . the women in my family" (*iVillage*). She describes learning about that history as being "like an excavation—I would find a piece here and there and have to reconfigure it" (*HarperCollins*).

Tan's American name is Amy, her Chinese name An-mei, which means "blessing from America," and this combination characterized her upbringing. In an interview with Elaine Woo for the *Los Angeles Times*, she explains that her parents did not want their children to blend, to assimilate entirely into American culture: "They wanted us to have American circumstances and Chinese character" (14). They had high expectations for their daughter; she was to become a neurosurgeon by career, a concert pianist by avocation. Although as an adult Tan says she recognizes that her parents wanted only the best for her, she remembers the difficulties of trying to live up to their expectations, including nothing less than straight As in school. In her essay "Midlife Confidential," Tan recalls the pressures of her childhood with some humor:

The word "fun" was not commonly used in our family, except, perhaps, in the following context: "Fun? Why you want have fun? What's so good about this? Just wasting time and money."

In our family, “fun” was a bad *f*-word, and its antonym was “hard,” as in hard work. Things that were hard led to worthwhile results; things that were fun did not.

Another bad *f*-word was “freedom,” as in “So you want American freedom to go wild and bring shame on your family?” Which brings me to another bad *f*-word, “friends,” those purveyors of corruption and shame whose sole purpose in life was to encourage me to talk back to my mother and make her long to return to China, where there were millions of girls my age who would be only too happy to obey their parents without question. The good *f*-word, of course, was “family,” as in “go to church with family,” or “do homework with family,” or “give your toys to your family in Taiwan.” (*Opposite of Fate* 136–37)

During this time, Tan began to show some signs of the writer she would become. When she was in third grade at Matanzas Elementary School, she won a prize for her essay “What the Library Means to Me.” In an interview, she says that she simply did what she had learned from her father the minister: “I tried to be very sincere, sort of go for the emotion . . . about how the library is a friend” (“Amy Tan: Best-Selling Novelist”). In this charming piece, reprinted in *The Opposite of Fate*, young Tan had already discovered the persuasive power of metaphor:

I love school because the many things I learn seem to turn on a light in the little room in my mind. I can see a lot of things I have never seen before. . . . My father takes me to the library every two weeks, and I check [out] five or six books each time. These books seem to open many windows in my little room. (269)

## Adolescence and College

The struggles and rebellion Tan experienced as a teenager are familiar territory to many of our students, though we hope their

lives have not been touched by such tragedy. When she was fifteen, Tan lost both her older brother and her father—within six months—to brain cancer. On the advice of relatives, Daisy moved her remaining family to Europe, first to the Netherlands, then Germany, and eventually Switzerland, where Tan began high school. Her conflicts with her mother escalated, particularly when she began dating a man rumored to be involved with drugs. Tan's mother hired a private detective to investigate her daughter and the wild crowd she had become part of, eventually confirming the boyfriend's illegal activities, as well as uncovering his status as an escaped inmate of a mental institution, and bringing her daughter before a local magistrate. Tan says that her mother's engineering of this confrontation "was the smartest thing she could have done: seeing him no longer had anything to do with rebellion, and I realized I wasn't interested anymore" (Ross, qtd. in Huntley 6).

After Tan graduated from the Institut Monte Rosa in Montreux, Switzerland, the family moved back to the San Francisco area. Her mother chose for her the Baptist Linfield College in Oregon, but after two semesters, Tan decided to transfer to San José City College to be near her Italian American boyfriend, Louis DeMattei, and she changed her major to English—both actions incurring further disapproval from her mother. The two did not speak for over six months. Tan transferred from the City College to San José State University, earned her BA in English and linguistics and an MA in linguistics, and ultimately married DeMattei, now a tax attorney. They have been married for over thirty years.

Tan worked on her doctorate in linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley and had various jobs, including working with children with delayed language development, before she became a freelance business and technical writer. A self-described



4. Show compassion.
5. Ask the important questions.

“If you hear others using clichés,” she writes, “stop to think whether you’re being lulled into inaction or the wrong action” (295). Rather than generalities, she suggests paying attention to nuance, advising: “Better to be subtle rather than overbearing, subversive rather than didactic” (296). A person’s own voice, she promises, “is one that seeks a personal truth” (296). She warns against the easy temptation of sarcasm, pointing out that “mean-spiritedness is wearying and limited in its one-dimensional point of view” (297). Finally, with a statement that seems to sum up her own fiction and, perhaps, fiction in general, she asserts, “What makes a story worthwhile is the question or questions it poses” (297).

Putting students in the position to offer writing tips is a good way to elicit their own values about writing. It suggests to them, first of all, that they have something to say—tips that a pro might offer the neophyte, the mentor to the apprentice. Second, it asks them to synthesize what they know about writing (or what they’ve been told) and rank order it. What, exactly, is important? Following is our final exam for an advanced composition course, a creative writing elective, made up of sophomores, juniors, and seniors:

### ***Writing Assignment***

Read the excerpt from a graduation speech given at Simmons College by the writer Amy Tan. After completing a semester of Advanced Composition, surely you have

**your own “five writing tips” to share with others. Clarify and explain your own tips—those gems and nuggets that you think are worth passing on to other aspiring writers.**  
(Reading: Excerpt from Tan’s graduation speech “Five Writing Tips”)

Students had more than a notion about the tips that mattered. Since the topic was fairly wide open, some chose to write about essays, others about fiction; different students addressed different parts of the writing process; a few referred to literary works studied in class; some focused on the microlevel of word, others on larger concepts such as audience. Here is a sampling of their responses, excerpts from their longer papers:

Planning sheets, especially word webs, work wonders. You start off with one word and end up with many new concrete ideas and images that may be jewels to work with since they are so unique. You may be like me and start with “pointe shoes” and finish with “high security.” . . .

It’s always hard for a writer to change his or her words, but you **MUST** edit! Remember to go after stronger verbs and pay attention to diction. Take out unnecessary “to be” and “to get” words, so as never to say “Joe is smarter then Einstein” but “Joe’s intelligence surpasses Einstein’s.”

—Jueli Li

The first and perhaps most important of all is the notion of keeping the subject concrete. Amy Tan rightly mentions this in her own personal list of five, but she assigns it merely second place, and I believe it to have much more importance. Nobody wants to read a story about Existence, History, Life, Sadness, or any other such capitalized form. And even if someone somewhere did desire such a story, it would be impossible to write.

Especially now. Willa Cather may have spoken of the magic age of 15, but at 17, I still do not have the kind of experience to write about Love or Death or Despair, and so forth. It is much more useful to speak of specific situations, to apply general concepts to explicit actions. Instead of an intangible essay about Romance, you have the story of Jay and Daisy or Charles and Emma or Lady Chatterly.

—Barry Revzin

Don't be afraid of how people will view your writing. Over the years, one of my main concerns has been if people will understand my writing or not. This has caused me to—instead of making the message of my piece subtle and hidden—bring the main idea right to the surface, screaming it in the faces of my readers until I'm blue with exhaustion. However, I've learned that if I write a clear and well-written paper, my message will come out, no matter how buried it is in my piece.

—Ira Kowler

Some students extolled the virtues of expansion, especially the use of detail. Yihan Yang combined form and content in her recommendations: “If I wanted to describe the weather, I can write, *It was windy outside*. A better description could say: *The gust of wind tore at my scarf and nearly pushed me off my feet.*”

Others argued for economy. Barry also cautioned against “long-windedness” and used as his support an alternative version of William Carlos Williams’s imagistic poem “The Red Wheelbarrow,” which he had committed to memory. Imagine, Barry suggests, if the poet had not been succinct, and he offers this revision, acknowledging that it might be a bit “exaggerated”:

**so much** of my life **depends**  
**upon** the events surrounding

a wooden, **red**, decaying **wheel**  
**barrow** with broken wheels

**glazed** over many times **with rain**  
**water** falling from the heavens

**beside**, in respect to the farm, **the white**  
**chickens**, dancing happily in the sunrise.

All in all, the students got it! But it's certainly true that once we teachers ask for advice, we might hear an unexpected voice in response. Ira also wrote:

Show, don't tell. This was a no-brainer. As Mrs. Wilchek always says, *One of these days, I'm going to get a tattoo on my forehead that says, "Show, don't tell."* The only reason Mrs. Wilchek would be willing to desecrate her body like that is because the mantra of show, don't tell is very important. . . .

Another possibility to engage students in writing about writing or themselves as writers could take off from Tan's rather lengthy essay "Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects." The last two-and-a-half pages center on her reasons for writing, beginning with "So why do I write?" (*Opposite of Fate* 321). She responds to her own question with a range of creative, humorous, reflective, and highly metaphorical "answers":

- Because I once thought I couldn't, and I now know I can.
- I write because often I can't express myself any other way, and I think I'll implode if I don't find the words.
- I write for very much the same reasons that I read: to startle my mind, to churn my heart, to tingle my spine, to knock the blinders off my eyes and allow me to see beyond the pale.

- I write because it is the ultimate freedom of expression. And for that reason it is also as scary as skiing down a glacier, as thrilling as singing in a rock-'n'-roll band, as dangerous as falling on your face doing both.
- Writing to me is an act of faith. (all from *The Opposite of Fate* 322–23)

Though almost anything can be made into an essay assignment, these “why I write” snippets could also be used as a freewrite or warm-up exercise generated by the question “Why do you write?”—although it’s probably wise to offer the caveat that no one can respond, “Because my grade depends on it”—or asked as a way to complete a sentence that Tan began (e.g., “I write for very much the same reasons that I read: . . .” Or “I write because I can’t . . .”).

### **From Story to Book: *The Joy Luck Club***

Tan claims to have had a lot of luck as she started her career as a novelist. Her first short story, “Endgame,” gained her admittance into the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, a fiction writers’ workshop. After that story was published in *Seventeen* magazine, the workshop leader sent it to Sandra Dijkstra, a literary agent, who became interested in Tan and encouraged her to write a full novel. “Endgame” centered on a chess prodigy, prefiguring the section in *The Joy Luck Club* on Waverly Jong.

Life and art did indeed intersect for Tan when, in 1986, her mother suffered a heart attack. The urgency of learning more about her mother, of truly getting to know her, increased, along with Tan’s interest in her Chinese heritage. She made her first trip to China in 1987 with her mother and husband and met her half sisters. Tan says that this trip was a life-changing experience that

gave her a sense of completeness: “I felt in some way that I belonged, that I had found a country related to me (Pearlman and Henderson, qtd. in Huntley 10).

The time was apparently right. Tan returned to San Francisco to find that Dijkstra had negotiated a \$50,000 advance for her—yet unwritten—book. Tan finished it in four months, claiming she feared that what she viewed as an extraordinary opportunity would be taken away. The book, originally titled *Wind and Water*, was renamed *The Joy Luck Club*, and the rest has become literary legend. In this narrative about mothers and daughters, Tan began telling the stories of intergenerational and cultural conflicts, the search for identity, and the desire to break silence that would continue into three more novels and two children’s books. Although she denies any one-to-one autobiographical correlations between one of the daughters and mothers in the book and herself and her mother, she writes in “Mother Tongue”: “the reader I decided on was my mother, because these were stories about mothers” (*Opposite of Fate* 278).

*The Joy Luck Club* was an immediate success, with generally favorable reviews, more than nine months on the *New York Times* bestseller list, sales exceeding four million copies, nominations for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and a \$1.23 million sale for the paperback rights. It has been translated into more than twenty languages, including Chinese. In 1989, *The Joy Luck Club* became a major motion picture.

Stories seem a perfect entranceway into *The Joy Luck Club* for students. Since this book has a tricky narrative made up of four interlocking sections (each with an opening fable and four vignettes), just being able to identify and follow specific story lines is essential to an appreciation of the work. Furthermore, *The Joy Luck Club* explores what we know, how we know it, the role of

memory in personal history, and the importance of viewpoint in understanding our experience. An assignment that students find accessible yet revealing is to write their own stories in response to a quotation from *The Joy Luck Club*.

### **Writing Assignment**

Use the following quotation as a starting point and “flesh out” one of the stories begun in the following quotation. Spend approximately 15 minutes on this task. (Your story does not need to be any specific length; if you don’t finish in 15 minutes, you are welcome to write “to be continued,” but do make every effort to bring the story to a close within that time frame.) Remember, I am not expecting a polished piece—nor will you receive a grade. This is an opportunity to explore!

*“Oh, what good stories! Stories spilling out all over the place! We almost laughed to death. A rooster that ran into the house screeching on top of dinner bowls, the same bowls that held him quietly in pieces the next day! And one about a girl who wrote love letters for two friends who loved the same man. And a silly foreign lady who fainted on a toilet when firecrackers went off next to her.”*  
(*The Joy Luck Club* 24)

Students chose different perspectives, focusing on love letters, firecrackers, or the rooster. The writing that resulted from this assignment with a class of sophomores, juniors, and seniors

averaged one to two pages, and it had the raw emotion and action characteristic of first drafts. Perhaps most important, students had fun.

Tuquynh Le got right into the action with “Rooroo and His Harem”:

I begin scattering the crumbs, this way and that, me, the ultimate crouton sprinkler system. The chickens behave relatively well, pecking my shoes to get at more but nothing worse. And then I come to Roo’s domain. He’s strutting towards me now, beak clicking, feet stomping, feathers fluffed and ready to go. Ah . . . sprinkle and scatter, sprinkle and scatter. . . .

Soul searing, burning, pinching, pain, and a splatter of red. Rooroo pulls back, eyes flashing proud with his tie dyed beak cocked to the side. I will have my revenge, Roo, you just wait! The side of my hands bleeds profusely, leaving a trail of red as I walk back into the house. I may have lost a battle to a rooster, but I have my pride!

—Tuquynh Le

Clearly a plot girl, Tuquynh has the action verbs, cinematic images, and escalating conflict that launch a writer into a story. The pose of the narrator speaking to the rooster adds humor even as it suggests an impending shoot-out, antagonists about to do battle.

One of the challenges for us as teachers is to help students understand what their choices are. When a question asks for “elements of style” or students need to “write an essay,” what are the choices available to them? What’s the repertoire? In this assignment, narrative stance, although not specified as an issue or focus, is central as students make quick decisions about who is telling the story. Joanne decided to write as the rooster’s predator—to write in his diary, no less. Here are two excerpts:

Dear Diary:

The people at the farm got a guard rooster today. Weasel told me. He was walking down the deer path with a big smirk on his face, kind of like the one he had the time Mrs. Woolf's favorite cub got taken into that pack from across the mountain, and he got to tell her the news. . . . Anyhoo, the rooster is supposed to stay up all night when the chickens are asleep to warn the people when I come. I didn't realize I was that special.

Dear Diary:

Hungry. Miserable, cold, wet. Slimy. It rained this morning and part of the den caved in. Should get back to work.

—*Joanne Buchbinder*

Joanne indicated that she was deciding to change perspectives as she wrote, but the very idea of becoming the rooster (which she does in the second entry) is delightful. And, of course, changing your mind is part and parcel of any first draft.

Other students inclined toward character studies. Again, the visual prevails in the following description by Angela Jiang, who was inspired by the foreign lady on the toilet. She offers a double narrative frame (i.e., the speaker identifies her brother as the storyteller), describes the physical details of the lady's appearance, and then sets the stage for a conflict to be explored. Following is the opening paragraph of three:

My brother retold the story, choking on his dumplings, hands flying everywhere in frantic gestures. The whole town had turned out to meet her; she was the granddaughter of one of the village elders, but had lived in the States her entire life. A joke from the start: she wore a tight skirt that picked up dust and dirt as soon as she stepped off the cab. Thin fingers clutched her leather purse, afraid of some unknown disease. Xiao Hao,

the village cherub, ran up and offered her some lee-chees as a welcoming gift, but—oh, what nerve!—she gasped and stumbled back muttering about larvae. Outsider, some called her; idiot, others muttered. The bad feeling crept up inside us, a mixture of guilt and annoyance. How dare she act like she was above us? She wouldn't sleep on the ground, she wouldn't walk on the dirt paths barefoot, she wouldn't kowtow at the family temples.

—Angela Jiang

As students discover their own storytelling voices and potential, we like to alert them to the stories all around them—in their families, friends, and communities—and encourage them to become aware of different ways to tell those stories. Again, Tan herself is instructive, as she recalls the distinct styles of her parents:

In an interview with Gretchen Giles, Amy Tan reveals that she learned the craft of story construction from her father, a very busy Baptist minister who managed to spend quality time with his children by reading his sermons to them and then asking for their opinions on content and language. Tan recalls that her father's sermons were written in narrative form, as carefully crafted stories. She also points out that in contrast to her father's carefully designed narratives, most of her mother's stories were neither formally constructed nor refined but rather evolved out of the daily life, activities, and conversations of the extended family. Daisy Tan, a talented natural storyteller, exchanged family news and stories of local events with other women . . . as they sat preparing vegetables or other ingredients for cooking. (Huntley 15)

## The Writing Life

Since the success of *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan has written three novels and two children's books. In "Angst and the Second Novel," in *The Opposite of Fate*, she described the pressure of trying to

follow such unusual success and, in fact, the difficulty of writing when she had so many requests for speaking engagements. But she need not have worried: *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) received critical praise, with reviewers applauding the mature writer. Tan says that her mother tired of being asked if she was the model for the mothers (or one of them) in *The Joy Luck Club* and suggested that she actually tell Daisy's story in her second novel. *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), a magical realist novel about the conflicts between two half sisters, also became an international bestseller.

Her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1995, the year Amy Tan began writing her fourth novel. "I wanted to write a story about memory," she says, "but in a way I suppose I thought that I would keep her alive—as long as I had to write this book, she would need to stay around" (*HarperCollins*). After her mother died in 1999, Tan completed *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), which explores the bonds of mothers and daughters through another series of interlocking stories, this time centering on a contemporary woman, her mother, and the past that links them.

Tan has also written two children's books, *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *Sagwa, the Chinese Siamese Cat* (1994). In 2003 she published *The Opposite of Fate*, what she calls "a book of musings" about the mysteries of fate and faith. The pieces in this collection run the gamut, from her essay on the library, to her lighthearted response to seeing the CliffsNotes of *The Joy Luck Club*, to her poignant reflection on the deaths of her father and brother and the murder of a dear college friend, whose ghost she believes lived on for a while in her computer. In the title essay, she recounts how she is currently coping with the effects of Lyme dis-

ease and the long, painful process that led to her diagnosis and recovery.

### **Ethnicity and Universality**

Although Tan has influenced an entire generation of readers and writers and acknowledges that she is a role model for many, especially Chinese Americans, she refuses what she calls “the burden” of representing a particular culture and warns against “balkanizing literature” (“The Spirit Within”). Rather than seeing herself as writing about “cultural dichotomies,” she says she is writing about “human connections” (“The Spirit Within”). She has, she asserts, her story to tell, perhaps her stories, but not *the* story of any entire group. Thus, she does not believe that she appeals more to an audience of one ethnicity or background than another. Her work, she hopes, contributes to her view of what fiction can do for all of us: “reading good fiction can help enrich what you notice in life[;] . . . it is like a meditation on what details you might also observe and bring into your own life. Reading helps you live well and fully” (Edwards).

One way to emphasize to our students the “human connections” in Tan’s work, particularly in *The Joy Luck Club*, is to make comparisons with other works about parents and children, and poetry is a good place to start. Poems on the bonds between mothers and daughters include “The Pomegranate” by Eavan Boland and “The Bistro Styx” by Rita Dove (both based on the Persephone-Demeter myth). Others include “Little Girl, My Stringbean” by Anne Sexton and “To a Daughter Leaving Home” by Linda Pastan. “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes explores the relationship the title names, and in “The Writer” by Richard Wilbur a father reflects on his daughter and her writing life. W. B. Yeats’s “A Prayer



“Thorough, well written, and insightful, the book will help teachers use not only Amy Tan’s work but also other contemporary literature with greater thoughtfulness and expertise.”

—Carol Jago, author of NCTE High School Literature Series books on Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and Sandra Cisneros



Since the publication of *The Joy Luck Club* in 1989, Amy Tan has become one of the most widely taught contemporary authors in high schools. Her fiction and nonfiction, with their timeless themes of family, culture, survival, and history, have made Tan a favorite of high school English teachers across the country.

In *Amy Tan in the Classroom*—the fifth book in the NCTE High School Literature Series—you’ll discover new ways to share the work of this important author with your students. Immensely practical, the book uses an activity-based approach to teaching both the print and film versions of *The Joy Luck Club*, as well as the nonfiction *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings*.

This volume features numerous resources and strategies for helping your students engage with Tan’s writing. Highlights include biographical information, critical analysis of Tan’s work, teacher-tested activities, writing assignments, and discussion questions, as well as an extensive unit on teaching and analyzing the film version of *The Joy Luck Club*.

*Amy Tan in the Classroom: “The art of invisible strength”* is a useful resource that will enliven your literature classroom with exciting and enriching student-centered activities.

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