

The Joy Luck Club

Study Guide Student Copy

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

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

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 Joy Luck Club: Jing-Mei Woo (Daughter) Suyuan Woo (Mother)

1. Why does Suyuan begin the first Joy Luck Club in Kweilin?
2. Briefly describe a typical Club meeting. (Note: Mah jong is an ancient Chinese game played with dice, tiles, and racks.)

3. Why do the women name their parties "Joy Luck"?

4. Suyuan tells her daughter that "...to despair was to wish back for something already lost." What is the "something" Suyuan lost during the Japanese invasion of China? Why do you think she decides to finally reveal this painful part of her past to her daughter?

5. Why does the San Francisco Joy Luck Club play the stock market?

6. List three of the five elements Suyuan believes comprise each person. In what way does too much of each element impact a person's life?

7. One of the themes in this novel is the inability of the Americanized daughters to understand their Chinese mothers. Find an example of this conflict between Suyuan and her daughter.

8. Define the Chinese word chaswei.

9. How does Jing-mei Woo know which seat at the mah jong table was her mother's place?

10. What does the story of Auntie An-mei's trip to China reveal about Communist China?

11. In the following passage from the story Jing-mei Woo is talking about her problems communicating with her mother. She says, "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more." (Pg. 27)

Find an incident from the story, which supports Jing-mei's statement.

12. How does Jing-mei react when her Aunts tell her they are going to send her to China so she can tell her half-sisters all about their mother Suyuan? Why does Jing-mei's behavior disturb the old Chinese women?

13. What is the significance of the last line in this story: "And I am sitting, at my mother's place at the mah jong table, on the East, where things begin"? (Pg. 32)

Scar: An-Mei Hsu (Mother) Rose Hsu Jordan (Daughter)

1. Why is An-mei taught that her mother is a ghost?
2. Briefly summarize the parables about the pregnant girl and the girl who refuses to listen. What lessons do the parables teach young An-mei?
3. What does it mean in Chinese to have *no show*?
4. Why is An-mei afraid of her father's portrait?
5. For what reasons do you think Popo continually tries to scare An-mei with parables and stories about her father's painting?
6. How did An-mei's neck become scarred? What evidence is there in the story that Popo knows how strong An-mei's love is for her mother?
7. What does Popo's daughter (An-mei's mother) do to illustrate the great bond between a mother and a daughter?

The Red Candle: Lindo Jong (Mother) Waverly Jong (Daughter)

1. What does Lindo Jong mean when she says her daughter's promise to come to dinner is "only fourteen carats"?
2. Why does young Lindo's mother refer to her daughter as Huang Taitai's daughter?
3. What is Lindo's first impression of the Huangs' home? Why does Lindo work very hard learning to sew and cook in the Huangs' servant's quarters?
4. In what ways is Lindo like the wind?
5. What is the significance of the red marriage candle? Under what circumstances does Lindo decide to blow out her husband's end of the candle?
6. Why does Huang Taitai remove all of Lindo's gold bracelets? How does Lindo feel without her gold bracelets?
7. List the three parts of Lindo's dream that convinces Huang Taitai to end Lindo's marriage to her son.
8. Why does Lindo buy another gold bracelet for herself every time she gets some extra money? For what reasons does she remove all of her gold on the day of the Festival of Pure Brightness?

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

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?
4. For what reasons can the story of the Moon Lady be called a myth?
5. Use the following passage from the story to illustrate how the story of the Moon Lady can also be considered to be a parable:
"For woman is yin," she cried sadly, "the darkness within, where untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds." (Pg. 82)
6. One of the themes in this novel is the idea that appearances are often different from reality. Find an incident from this chapter that helps to illustrate this theme.

7. Another theme in this novel is the inability of the Chinese mothers to communicate with their Americanized daughters. What do the following lines from the beginning of this chapter tell the reader about Ying-Ying's relationship to her daughter? In what ways are Ying-Ying and her daughter alike?
"And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others." (Pg. 64)

PART II: THE TWENTY-SIX MALIGNANT GATES

1. What lesson or moral is taught by the parable at the beginning of Part II?
2. In what ways does this parable help to illustrate the following theme from this novel? The generation gap, including age and heritage, between mothers and daughters makes communication between them difficult.
3. What might the book, *The Twenty-six Malignant Gates* represent in this story?

Rules of the Game: Waverly Jong (Daughter) Lindo Jong (Mother)

1. What is the "art of invisible strength" Waverly learns from her mother?
2. Find two incidents in this chapter where Lindo demonstrates her fierce Chinese pride.
3. State a generalization about life Lindo is trying to teach Waverly in the following passage from this chapter.

"This American rules," she concluded at last. "Every time people come out from foreign country, must know rules. You not know, judge say, Too bad, go back. They not telling you why so you can use their way go forward. They say, Don't know why, you find our yourself. But they knowing all the time. Better you take it, find out why yourself."
(Pg. 95)

4. In what way does the wind mentioned in the following selection from the story relate back to the wind mentioned in the story about the red candle?

"A light wind began blowing past my ears. It whispered secrets only I could hear."

"Blow from the South," it murmured. "The wind leaves no trail." I saw a clear path, the traps to avoid. The crown rustled. "Shhh! Shhh!" said the corners of the room. The wind blew stronger. "Throw sand from the East to distract him" The knight came forward ready for the sacrifice. The wind hissed, louder and louder. "Blow, blow, blow. He cannot see. He is blind now. Make him lean away from the wind so he is easier to knock down." (Pg. 98)

5. When Waverly returns home after running away, her mother says with a triumphant smile, "Strongest wind cannot be seen." (Pg. 103) For what reasons do you agree or disagree with Lindo's belief that she is the victor in her battle with Waverly? Cite incidents from the story to support your answer.

6. One of the themes in this novel is the conflict between the Chinese heritage of the mothers and the American heritage of their daughters. Find an example of this conflict in this story.

The Voice from the Wall: Lena St. Clair (Daughter) Ying-ying St. Clair (Mother)

1. What is Lena saying about her mother in the following passage? In what way is Ying-ying similar to An-me's mother from the story, Scar?

"Because, even as a young child, I could sense the unspoken terrors that surrounded our house, the ones that chased my mother until she hid in a secret dark corner of her mind. And still they found her. I watched, over the years, as they devoured her, piece by piece, until she disappeared and became a ghost." (Pg. 105)

2. List three ways, Ying-ying behaves like an unbalanced woman.
3. One of the themes in this story is the generation gap and cultural gap between the mothers and daughters resulting in a lack of communication between them. Find a passage in this story which illustrates this communications gap by pointing out the fact that Lena can understand her mother's Chinese words, but not their meanings.
4. How does Lena define the "worst possible thing that could happen" in her life? In what way is Ying-ying's decline into insanity an example of the "worst possible thing that could happen"?
5. What lesson is taught by the parable about the mother who must die the death of a thousand cuts?
6. Why is Lena both jealous of and sorry for the girl in the next apartment?

Half and Half: Rose Hsu Jordan (Daughter) An-mei Hsu (Mother)

1. What does the white Bible under the table leg in An-mei's home represent in this story?
2. What is the main reason Ted wants to divorce Rose?
3. Briefly describe the importance the book *The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates* has for An-mei.
4. How does the following excerpt from the story relate both to Bing's death and to Rose's impending divorce? What generalization about life does it teach?

"I think about Bing, how I knew he was in danger, how I let it happen. I think about my marriage, how I had seen the signs, really I had. But I just let it happen. And I think now that fate is shaped half by expectation, half by inattention. But somehow, when you lose something you love, faith takes over. You have to pay attention to what you lost. You have to undo the expectation." (Pg. 140)

5. Why is it significant that Bing's name is written in the Bible in erasable pencil?

Two Kinds: Jing-Mei Woo (Daughter) Suyuan Woo (Mother)

1. List the ways Suyuan tries to make her daughter into a prodigy. Why does she settle on Jing-Mei becoming a great pianist?
2. In what ways does Jing-Mei fail her mother by falling short of her mother's expectations and asserting her own will?
3. What do you think the piano might represent in this story?
4. Why is it significant that the song Jing-Mei refuses to memorize has two parts, one called "Pleading Child" and the other called "Perfectly Contented"? Remember that one of the themes in this novel is the inability of mothers and daughters to communicate with each other.

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.

Rice Husband: Lena St. Clair (Daughter) Ying-ying St. Clair (Mother)

1. Define Chunwang chilhan. What kinds of things can Ying-ying predict? Why is Lena worried about her mother's opinion of their new home?
2. Why does Lena, as a young school girl, begin leaving food on her plate?
3. Define anorexia. What does Lena's husband's ignorance of her dislike for ice cream suggest to the reader about the quality of their marriage?
4. List two ways Lena helps Harold to establish his business. In what ways does she share or not share in his success?

5. Find the sentences in this story which help to connect it to the whole collection of stories by once again referring to one of the characters as a "ghost."

6. Why does Ying-ying refer to the small bedroom table as *Chunwang chihan*? What does this small table represent in this story?

7. At the end of this story the small table topples, breaking the black vase.
"It doesn't matter," I say, and I start to pick up the broken glass shards. "I knew it would happen."
"Then why you don't stop it?" asks my mother.
And it's such a simple question. (Pg. 181)

What is Lena referring to when she says, "And it's such a simple question"?

8. In what way is this story connected to the parable at the beginning of Part III.

Four Directions: Waverly Jong (Daughter) Lindo Jong (Mother)

1. Why does Waverly think she and her mother are incompatible because her mother is a Horse and she is a Rabbit?
2. For what reasons does Waverly want her mother to see her apartment?
3. After her fight with her mother, why do you think young Waverly is unable to regain her earlier success at chess?
4. How does Waverly trick her mother into inviting Rich over for dinner?
5. List three important Chinese customs Rich violates at dinner which Waverly believes are insults to her mother.
6. Find a passage in this story in which Waverly finally learns to accept her mother as a person instead of always seeing her as an adversary.
7. State a theme of this novel from the following passage:

"The three of us, leaving our differences behind, stepping on the plane together, sitting side by side, lifting off, moving West to reach the East." Pg. 205

Without Wood: Rose Hsu Jordan (Daughter) An-mei Hsu (Mother)

1. Who is Old Mr. Chou? Why is young Rose afraid to go see him?
2. Define the Chinese words "hulihudu" and "heimongmong." In what ways is Rose both hulihudu and heimongmong?
3. What does An-mei mean when she tells Rose she is without wood? What does An-mei think Rose can do so she has wood?
4. It is clear that Rose's husband wants a divorce. Why then does An-mei tell her daughter to stop talking to a psychiatrist and talk to her husband?
5. At the end of the story, why do you think Rose dreams that her mother is in the garden planting weeds? What does the garden represent in this story?
6. In what way is An-mei correct when she wants Rose to listen to her mother?

Best Quality: Jing-Mei Woo (Daughter) Suyuan Woo (Mother)

1. Why did the bartender's mother give him a jade pendant?
2. What does Jing-Mei's inability to watch the crabs cooking reveal to the reader about her character?
3. List two reasons Jing-Mei feels humiliated at the dinner.
4. What is Suyuan trying to tell her daughter in the following passages from the story? Why does Suyuan want to give Jing-Mei the pendant?

"My mother looked at me and smiles. 'Only you pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different.'

"For a long time, I wanted to give you this necklace. See, I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning. This is your life's importance." (Pgs. 234-235)

5. In what ways, at the end of this story, is Jing-mei like her mother?

PART IV: QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WESTERN SKIES

1. What generalization about life does the parable at the beginning of this section teach?

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

1. The moral of the story about the turtle is "...t is useless to cry. Your tears do not wash away your sorrows. They feed someone else's joy." (Pg. 244) 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?
4. For what reasons does An-mei refer to the First wife as a ghost? How does the First wife cause An-mei's mother pain?
5. Another of the themes is the confusion between appearance and reality. Which of the incidents in this story helps to illustrate this theme?
6. What does An-mei's mother teach her daughter before she dies? How does An-mei demonstrate her strength to the Second wife?
7. What does An-mei learn from the article about the birds.

Waiting Between the Trees: Ying-Ying St. Clair (Mother) Lena St. Clair (Daughter)

“Maybe it was the watermelon seeds I was eating: I thought of that laughing man from the night before. And just then, a large wind blew in from the north and the flower on the table split from its stem and fell at my feet.

This is the truth. It was as if a knife had cut the flower’s head off as a sign. Right then, I knew I would marry this man.” (Pg. 279)

1. What does the wind represent in this passage from the story?
2. As a tiger lady, what personality traits does Ying-ying believe she possesses?
3. Why does Ying-ying decide to marry St. Clair? What does she give up when she marries him?
4. One of the repeating images in this novel is that of a ghost. In what way is Ying-ying like a ghost?
5. Why does Ying-ying decide to tell Lena about her past?

Double Face: Lindo Jong (Mother) Waverly Jong (Daughter)

1. Why does Lindo want her daughter to have "American circumstances and Chinese character"?
2. What is Lindo saying to her daughter when they look at their similar images in the mirror and she tells Waverly "You can see your character in your face,...You can see your future"? (Pg. 292)
3. Why does Lindo name her daughter after the street where they live?
4. For what reasons does Waverly like being a person with two faces?
5. What does the crooked nose represent in this section?

A Pair of Tickets: Jing-Mei Woo (Daughter) Suyuan Woo (Mother)

1. What do the following Chinese names mean in English?
Chwun Yu -

Chwun Hwa -

Suyuan -

Jing-mei -
2. Why is it important to Jing-mei that Auntie Lindo write to her half-sisters in China to tell them that Suyuan is dead?
3. Critics applaud Amy Tan's ability to shift view points within a story. In what ways does the shifting of view points from Jing-mei as the narrator to her father as the narrator help to make the story more believable.
4. What theme does the last paragraph in the story illustrate?