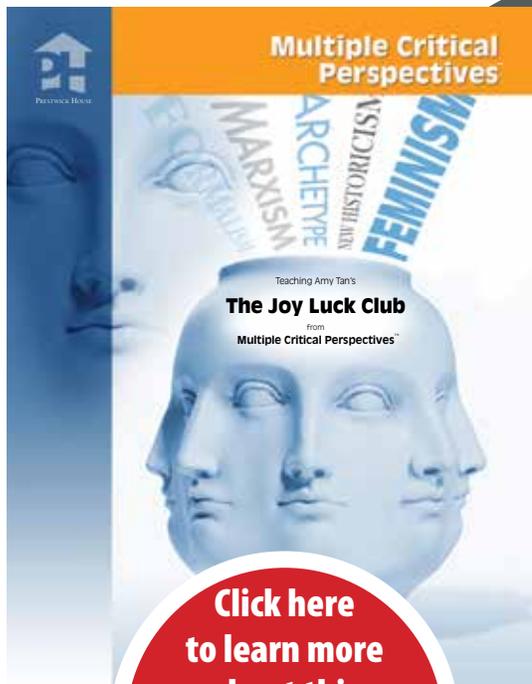




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Teaching Amy Tan's

The Joy Luck Club

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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

THE *JOY LUCK CLUB* is a work of fiction that falls into a genre category known as short story cycle. Each chapter of the novel is spoken in the voice of one of the characters, providing unique perspectives of their lives and the lives of their families. Although each story or chapter could be a short story that stands on its own, it is nevertheless subtly intertwined with the other story-chapters to create an overall narrative of family relationships, providing insight into the past events which impact present situations.

In the short story cycle genre, the author has a specific purpose for the placement of the stories reflecting each story's purpose, meaning, and relationship to the other stories in the cycle. Although each of the stories is told in a way that could isolate it, its purpose is deliberate.

There are also strong autobiographical elements at the core of *The Joy Luck Club*. Tan's mother herself, like Suyuan Woo, was forced to flee China during a war and leave behind three daughters whom Tan knew nothing about until she was an adult. Unlike Suyuan, Tan's mother was able to reunite with her daughters. Thus, the novel is fiction, the events chosen and arranged to establish Tan's intents and themes.

Jing-mei begins the cycle, but in the subsequent three sections, hers is the last story. The cycle ends with her visiting China and meeting her sisters, thus providing some closure to her mother's longing and providing for herself some of the understanding she desired her entire life.

After Jing-mei's introduction to her mother's Joy Luck Club, the stories of the three surviving mothers follow a progression that begins with the physical sacrifice of An-mei's mother in "Scar" and culminates in Ying-ying's loss of her self in "The Moon Lady." The stories are not randomly placed. Rather, Tan arranges the mothers' monologues to build in emotional intensity.

Likewise, the four sections form a progression in intensity beginning with "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," the mothers' stories of their journeys from China and their—ultimately unfulfilled—hopes for their daughters. The stories intensify through "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates," in which the daughters believe themselves to be in adversarial relationships with their mothers. Tan then illustrates the evolution of the strained mother-daughter relationships from adversarial to a simple lack of communication in "American Translation." This section ends with Jung-mei and her mother's finally achieving some degree of understanding of one another.

Thus, while the "novel" does not necessarily follow the conventional plot structure of inciting incident, rising action, climax, and so on, certainly there is a scheme to the placement of the individual vignettes, which collectively build to a climax and resolution.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Joy Luck Club*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (ALSO “PSYCHOANALYTICAL” OR “FREUDIAN THEORY”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Analyzing the Characters for Evidence of Id, Ego, and Superego

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Joy Luck Club: Psychoanalytic Worksheet One: Id, Ego, and Superego*.
2. Divide the class into eight groups or a number of groups divisible by eight.
3. Assign to each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following characters:

- Jing-mei
- Suyuan
- Lindo
- Waverly
- Ying-ying
- Lena
- An-mei
- Rose

4. Have students peruse the book and note all examples of behavior that illustrate the functioning of any of the three aspects of the personality.

NOTE: Advise students that they may not find evidence of all aspects of the personality for all characters.

5. As they note their findings on the handout, have students answer the following questions:
 - Does your character seem more to integrate the three aspects of the personality, or does one aspect seem predominant?
 - If one is predominant, which one?
 - Would you consider your character to be a well-rounded character or more a character type?
 - How does Tan's treatment of your character contribute to her achieving her purpose for the book?
6. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.

Applying the Mythological/Archetypal Approach to *The Joy Luck Club*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Searching the Text for Evidence of Archetypal Characters

1. Divide the class into eight groups or pairs (or a number of groups or pairs divisible by eight).
2. Assign each group, or allow each group to choose, one of the eight main characters:
 - Lindo
 - Waverly
 - Jing-mei (June)
 - Ying-ying
 - An-mei
 - Lena
 - Rose
 - Suyuan
3. Have the groups assign one of the following archetypal roles to its assigned character and then peruse the novel for evidence to support that assignment.
 - the HERO
 - the SCAPEGOAT
 - the LONER or OUTCAST
 - the VILLAIN
 - the TEMPTRESS
 - the EARTH MOTHER/GODDESS
 - the SPIRIT or INTELLECT
 - the SAGE, the wise woman, the prophetess/priestess, etc.

NOTE: If, within an individual group, there is serious disagreement about what role to assign its character, allow the dissenting student(s) either to form a separate group—if more than one agree—or work alone. The key to this exercise is the textual support the students provide.

NOTE: Also that more than one character may fill a particular role, and not all roles will necessarily be filled. One or more groups may also feel that their characters fill none of the roles. You can accept this, but they must be prepared to defend this thesis in the event that another group working on the same character has assigned the character to a role and found appropriate support.

Formalism Applied to The Joy Luck Club



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Analyzing Relationships Between Characters

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Formalist Worksheet One: Exploring the Relationships of *The Joy Luck Club*.
2. Divide the class into eight groups or a number of groups divisible by eight.
3. Assign to each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following relationships from the novel:
 - Lindo vs. Waverly
 - Rose vs. An-mei
 - Ying-ying vs. Lena
 - June vs. Suyuan
 - June vs. Waverly
 - Waverly vs. Marvin Chen
 - Rose vs. Ted Jordan
 - Lena vs. Harold Livotny
4. Have each group examine the portrayal of its assigned relationship in the novel and complete the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss any trends that appear in the nature of the relationships portrayed (e.g., it is clear that all of the relationships portrayed in any detail are female-female; most are mother-daughter; most operate on some ambiguous level of love-hate, etc.)
7. Have the students rank the importance of the relationships to the overall meaning of the novel.
 - Which relationship(s) are the most significant to the plot and meaning of the book? Why?
 - Which relationship(s) are *least* significant? Why?