Amy Tan’s
The Joy Luck Club

NEW EDITION

Bloom’s Modern Critical INTERPRETATIONS
Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM
Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations

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Amy Tan’s
The Joy Luck Club
New Edition

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My introduction briefly questions the permanent place in an American canon of Amy Tan’s indubitably charming *The Joy Luck Club*.

All ten essayists would disagree with my doubts. Canonical disputes can be resolved only by time.

Mother-daughter relationships are the inevitable topic for all the essayists, including those who extend their view to *The Kitchen God’s Wife*. It would be absurd of me to express a preference between one of Amy Tan’s admirers and another, as they are compelled to center on her one dominant theme. That there should be a certain sameness in their comments may or may not indicate a limitation in Tan’s vision.
In an accomplished essay, Myra Jehlen sees Amy Tan, against all odds, returning to Whitman’s stance and singing a latter-day *Song of Myself*. That implicitly is high praise and, if justified, might give *The Joy Luck Club* an aesthetic dignity beyond the popular success it continues to enjoy. Will it be a permanent part of the revised canon of an American literature “opened up” by consideration of gender and ethnicity, or will it prove only another period piece, in which we currently abound?

Amy Tan is a skilled storyteller and a remarkable personality. Jehlen charmingly says: “Amy Tan has read her Emerson, and she doesn’t believe him. This is not surprising, as he probably would have doubted her.” I would murmur that it all depends upon *which* Emerson Tan has read, as there are so many. Having met and admired Tan, I would recommend *The Conduct of Life*, which is consonant with her rugged but amiable stance toward reality.

Jehlen eloquently concludes by stating both Tan’s relation to Whitman and the significant differences:

Jing-Mei becomes herself finally when, like Whitman, she can be the writer of the Body and the writer of the Soul, can sing both others and herself. If she is Whitman’s critic as well as his descendant, it is because America has lost its innocence in the matter of individualism. Moreover, the duplicities of the notion of the universal self have been revealed in our time especially by the protestations of people of Amy Tan’s kind: women and non-whites. It is not surprising that Jing-Mei’s claim be not as universal as
Whitman's, nor that its costs be apparent. It is surprising to find her claiming the old transcendent, appropriating self at all, and, in the name of culture, singing a latter-day “Song of Myself.”

Jehlen is aware, as I am, that Whitman attempted to speak for women as for men and for all ethnic strains. What she doubts is the Whitmanian possibility of universal representation, since we are in a time of group identities: gendered, diversely oriented sexual preferences, ethnicities. And yet Whitman, at his best, permanently has reached and held a universal audience. *Song of Myself* is not a period piece.
Amy Tan’s first work, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989),¹ is a challenge to the novel as a “narrative paradigm” (Jameson, 151) in several ways: form, narrative structure, and narrative techniques. It is not a novel in the sense that only one story, “his story” is presented; it is a work of sixteen “her stories.” The stories are “presented” not by one single third-person narrator either from her particular perspective or from the various “points of view” of the characters. These are narrative techniques conventionally associated with the novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book is divided into four main sections; the stories are told from the viewpoints of four Chinese mothers and their Chinese American daughters. The only exception is Suyuan Woo, who, having recently died, speaks not for herself but through her daughter, Jing-mei. The daughter tells her mother’s stories as she takes her mother’s place at the mahjong table and on the fateful trip to China. The stories, “told” by the three mothers and four daughters at different times and in different settings, resemble fragments of stories collected by a sociologist and randomly put together, rather than carefully constructed narratives set in a deliberate order by an author. In other words, *The Joy Luck Club* employs an unusual narrative strategy. In this chapter, I explore the connection between the narrative strategy employed in *The Joy Luck Club* and the relationships between the Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters.

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In *The Joy Luck Club*, important themes are repeated in the stories like musical leitmotifs and presented from slightly different angles in order to give the reader a continuous sense of life as well as a full understanding of the significance of each event. The unique structure of *The Joy Luck Club* allows the unconnected fragments of life, revealed from different but somewhat overlapping perspectives by all the “reliable” narrators, to unfold into a meaningful, continuous whole so that the persistent tensions and powerful bonds between mother and daughter, between generations, may be illuminated through a montage effect on the reader.

The traditional novel as a “narrative paradigm” (Jameson, 151) entails a set of rules that bestow legitimacy upon certain narrative forms and preclude certain other forms. Jameson expounds the notion of “narrative paradigm” by claiming that the “forms” of the novel as the “inherited narrative paradigms” are: “the raw material on which the novel works, transforming their ‘telling’ into its ‘showing,’” estranging commonplaces against the freshness of some unexpected ‘real,’ foregrounding convention itself as that through which readers have hitherto received their notions of events, psychology, experience, space, and time” (151). The “inherited narrative paradigms” determine rules of the game and illustrate how they are to be applied. The rules define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question. Oral narrative forms, such as popular stories, myths, legends, and tales, are thus viewed as belonging to a “savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated” mentality, composed of opinions, prejudice, ignorance and ideology (Lyotard, 19). As Lyotard notes, oral narrative forms have been deemed fit for women and children only and have not been rightly considered as appropriate or competent forms to be subsumed under the category of the novel. As a Western-conceived notion, the “narrative paradigm” of the novel thus excludes various minority subnarrative traditions, including women’s. Structurally, *The Joy Luck Club* is an interesting example because it rejects artificial unity and espouses the fragmentary, one of the main features of postmodernism.\(^2\)

The dissolution of unity in the traditional novel, best manifested in the “fragmentation” of the work, serves to highlight different themes that evolve around the mother–daughter relationship. *The Joy Luck Club* is divided into four sections, each of which consists of four stories. Each of the four sections of the book begins with a prologue, a brief narrative illustrative of the theme of that section. The Joy Luck Club is a monthly mahjong gathering to which the generation of the Chinese mothers has belonged for decades and with which the generation of the American daughters has grown up. Like four Chinese boxes, the complexity of the narrative structure is revealed through stories told within stories by the mothers to the daughters. In this manner, Tan directly puts forward the views, feelings, emotions, and thoughts of her
characters, stressing the mixture of action, consciousness, and subconsciousness. In the chapter “Without Wood,” a daughter tells about a dream she once had as a child that reveals subconsciously the daughter’s strong desire to resist the clutching influence of the mother on her. In this dream, the daughter finds herself in a playground filled with rows of sandboxes. In each sandbox there is a doll. Haunted by the feeling that her mother knows exactly which doll she will pick, the daughter deliberately chooses a different one. When the mother orders the guardian of the gate to the dreamworld to stop her, the little girl becomes so frightened that she remains frozen in place (186).

Tan’s storytelling technique reveals the complexity of the dark, invisible mind of cultural consciousness and subconsciousness best portrayed by the stories within stories. In The Joy Luck Club, Tan moves with swiftness and ease from one story to another, from one symbol or image to another. In a sense, The Joy Luck Club can be properly called a collection of intricate and haunting memories couched in carefully wrought stories. Tan has purposely externalized the eight characters’ mental world by allowing each of them to tell her own story in a deceptively simple manner, thus allowing the reader to plunge into the mind of the characters. The motives, desires, pains, pleasures, and concerns of the characters are thereby effectively dramatized. This particular writing strategy allows Tan to transcend the conventional novelistic dichotomy of preferred “showing” and undesirable “telling.” The stories thus tell us a great deal about individual characters, their reaction to each other, and their activities together. Because the stories are all told in the mothers’ and the daughters’ own voices, we are spared the pressing question with which the reader of a conventional novel is constantly bombarded: Am I dealing with a “reliable” or “unreliable” narrator? While immersed in particular and individual perspectives, the reader of The Joy Luck Club also confronts the more general and lasting concerns of many generations. Unlike Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior, which relates the life experience of one woman and concentrates on one single family, the stories in The Joy Luck Club, with its characters and circumstances skilfully interwoven, presents a continuous whole more meaningful than the sum of its parts.

In The Joy Luck Club, Tan probes the problematic mother–daughter relationship in sixteen separate stories spanning two generations of eight women. Though the eight characters are divided into four families, the book itself is concerned more with an unmistakable bifurcation along generational lines: mothers, whose stories all took place in China, and daughters, whose stories deal with their lives in America. Though the mothers all have different names and individual stories, they seem interchangeable in that they all have similar personalities—strong, determined, and endowed with mysterious power—and that they all show similar concerns about their daughters’ welfare. As a
result, the mothers are possessively trying to hold onto their daughters, and
the daughters are battling to get away from their mothers. The four mothers
and four daughters are different, but their differences remain insignificant
as the action of the novel is focused on the persistent tensions and powerful
bonds between them.

Tan’s characters are seen in both detail and outline. The first-person tes-
timonies allow the reader to examine each of the characters closely and to
develop a sense of empathy with each of them; but, at the same time, the tes-
timonies reveal a pattern, particularly in the way the mothers and daughters
relate to one another. The purpose of this treatment is obvious: to portray the
mother and daughter relationship as both typical and universal.

In Tan’s novel, The Joy Luck Club is a bridge uniting both space and
time. The Joy Luck Club connects the sixteen intricately interlocking sto-
ries and helps to reveal and explain the infinite range and complexity of
mother–daughter relationships. Within the narrative, it joins two continents
and unites the experiences of the mothers and the daughters. The American
daughters are alien to Chinese culture as much as they are to their mothers’
uncanny, Chinese ways of thinking. To the daughters, cultural and ethnic
identity is possible only when they can fully identify themselves with their
mothers through their maturation into womanhood. The sharing of cultural
experiences between mothers and daughters through the device of storytell-
ing transforms structurally isolated monologues into meaningful dialogues
between mother and mother, daughter and daughter, and, more important,
mother and daughter and coalesces the sixteen monologues into a coher-
ent whole. While the mother and daughter relationships are unique in the
ethnic context of Tan’s novel, they also have a universal aspect. Indeed, all
women share this experience, regardless of time and space. An-mei Hsu is
puzzled by both the specific and universal qualities of the mother–daughter
relationship. Raised traditionally, she was taught to swallow her desires, her
bitterness, and the misery of others. Rejecting her upbringing, she tries to
instill in her daughter a strong sense of self. Unfortunately, her daughter is
a passive individual. An-mei Hsu is thus convinced that regardless of their
respective upbringing, mothers and daughters are somehow condemned to
being similar: “And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she
came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was
born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are
like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same
way” (215).

Through her structural experiments with the elements of fiction and
her storytelling device, and with the testimonial mode of characterization,
Tan has pushed her novel beyond the merely conventional practice of the
novel (to mimic the convention of the appearance of life, as done by many traditional novelists). Instead, she tries to do away with “his story” and present “her life” from the perspectives of the individual women characters in the form of loosely connected monologues. These monologues serve to translate as faithfully as possible the intricate relationship that can exist between a mother and her daughter.

Tan’s extensive use of symbols and images creates a mood of expression that reveals and explains the infinite range and complexity of these mother—daughter relationships. Each of the four sections of *The Joy Luck Club* begins with a prologue, defining the theme of that section while disclosing certain aspects of the problem in the mother—daughter relationship. The first prologue contains a cluster of images that highlight the nature of this relationship in the book and summarize the whole novel. This prologue centers around an old woman who remembers that, while still in Shanghai, she bought a swan for a small sum. The swan, according to the vendor, was once a duck who had managed to stretch his neck in the hope of becoming a goose. On the boat sailing to America, the old woman swore to the swan that she would one day have a daughter whom no one would look down upon, for she would speak only perfect English. In order for this daughter to know her mother’s meaning, she would give her the swan (17).

However, upon arriving in America, the swan is confiscated, and the old woman is left with only one of the swan’s feathers. This feather is far too insignificant for her to convince anyone, least of all her daughter, how beautiful the swan was. Furthermore, the daughter she had hoped for has become an unsympathetic “stranger” who does not even speak her language. The prologue thus ends on a poignant note. Indeed, year after year, the mother waits for the moment when she would be able to tell her daughter in perfect American English that the feather is far from worthless, for it symbolizes all of her “good intentions” (17).

The prologue sets the tone and the reasons for the tensions and conflicts in the mother—daughter relationship. The “swan” and the “old woman” who sailed across the ocean together, “stretching their necks toward America” (17), are an emblem of the four mothers who came to the United States, hoping to give their daughters a better life than the one they had in China. The “good intentions” are clearly stated. But the mother, left with an almost worthless feather, is condemned to wait patiently many years until the daughter is finally mature enough to come back to her, to appreciate her, and to reconstruct the beautiful swan from the feather. The swan is therefore emblematic of both the mother’s new life in America and, more important, her past one in China, an experience the mother wants to communicate to her daughter. However, only a mature daughter, who has overcome the
psychological and cultural gap separating her from her mother is capable of coming to terms with this experience.

The mother–daughter relationship is the central issue and focal point in the dialogues between the mothers and daughters in Tan’s book. The novel traces the psychological development of the American daughter and her final acceptance of the Chinese mother and what the Chinese mother stands for. Jing-mei Woo, who replaces her recently deceased mother at the mahjong table, is the first to tell a story on behalf of her mother; she is also the very last daughter to recount her own story. It is interesting to note that when she is asked by her three “aunts” to go to China in order to fulfill her mother’s long-cherished wish to meet her lost twin babies, Jing-mei shocks and upsets them with her confused yet honest remark that she would not know what to tell her sisters because she did not really know her mother: “What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother?” (40).

The mothers are all frightened by this response. Indeed, they sense in it the confusion of their own daughters. In Jing-mei, they recognize their own daughters, all as ignorant and as unmindful of the truths and hopes their mothers brought over with them from China (40). Ironically, the accomplishment of the mother’s dream for her daughter, a dream that entailed her physical removal from the motherland, results in multifarious problems in the relationship with her daughter.

In Tan’s novel, the Chinese mothers are all strong-willed, persistent, hard to please, and overly critical. They often make their presence and their goodwill look like outrageous impositions rather than tacit influences. When, for example, Jing-mei Woo describes her mother’s New Year crab dinner, we learn that, although she does not like this dish, she is obliged to eat it since her refusal to do so would constitute a rejection of her mother’s love (202). The food and the advice offered by the mothers are hard to refuse not only because they are a symbol of love but also because they tend to carry the full weight of maternal authority. That is why Waverly Jong is convinced that telling one’s mother to be quiet would be tantamount to committing suicide (173). In another example, Waverly tries to make her mother accept her American boyfriend by showing her a fur coat that he has given her as a token of his love. Totally dejected by her mother’s antagonism toward her boyfriend, whom the mother does not consider good enough for her daughter, Waverly Jong feels distressed at not being able to shake off her mother’s clutching influence. When she looks once again at the coat her mother has just finished criticizing, she becomes convinced that it is, indeed, shabby (169).

The mother’s wish for the daughter to live a better life than the one she had back in China is revealed in the conversation between the Chinese woman and her swan on her journey to America in the novel’s first prologue.
Ironically, this wish becomes the very source of the conflicts and tensions in their relationship. This is made perfectly clear by Jing-mei Woo when she half jokingly, half-remorsefully recalls her ever-agonizing childhood, a period during which her mother unsuccessfully attempts to transform her into a child prodigy. In order to prepare Jing-mei for a future that she hopes will be brilliant, Suyuan Woo nightly submits Jing-mei to a series of tests while forcing her to listen to countless stories about amazing children (133–34). Mother and daughter finally settle on Jing-mei's becoming a concert pianist, and Jing-mei begins to take piano lessons from Mr. Old Chong, a retired piano teacher who happens to be deaf. As a result, the daughter manages to get away with playing more or less competently while her teacher conducts an imaginary piece of music in his head (148).

Another daughter, Rose Hsu Jordan, is married to a “foreigner” who wishes to divorce her. Her mother, An-mei Hsu, urges her to speak up in the hope of saving her marriage. She does this by juxtaposing the Chinese way with the American way. The Chinese way consists of not expressing one’s desires, not speaking up, and not making choices. The American way consists of exercising choices and speaking up for oneself. An-mei Hsu raised Rose in the American way. She hoped that this would allow her daughter to lead a better life than the one she had in China. Indeed, in China people had no choice. Since they could not speak up, they were forced to accept whatever fate befell them (241). An-mei Hsu reminds Rose that by not speaking up, she “can lose her chance forever” (215).

The frustration that Waverly’s mother, Lindo Jong, feels is shared by all the mothers. This frustration is best summarized in her painful and poignant confession during the course of which she accuses herself of being responsible for the way Waverly has turned out. Her sense of responsibility stems from the fact that she is the one who wanted Waverly to have the best of both worlds, and it leads her to openly berate herself for not being able to foresee that her daughter’s American circumstances would not necessarily mix well with her Chinese reality (254).

The alienation between mother and daughter often stems either from a lack of understanding or from various forms of miscommunication. While the daughters, all born in America, entirely adapt to the customs and language of the new land, the immigrant mothers still hold onto those of China. All the mothers feel their daughters’ impatience when they speak Chinese and are convinced that their daughters think they are stupid when they attempt to communicate with them in broken English (40–41). If Jing-mei is initially reluctant to carry out her mother’s long-cherished wish to be reunited with her two lost sisters, it is mainly because she believes that she and her mother have never understood one another. The language barrier that existed between
them was such that both mother and daughter imperfectly translated each other’s words and meanings (37).

In a tragicomic incident that exemplifies the futile attempt to bridge the mother–daughter gap, Lindo Jong is proudly speaking to her daughter about Taiyuan, her birthplace. Waverly mistakes Taiyuan for Taiwan and is subsequently visibly irritated when her mother loudly corrects her. The daughter’s unintentional mistake, combined with the mother’s anger, destroys their attempt to communicate. Consequently, they are both plunged, once again, into a steely silence (183). In another example of Tan’s lightness of touch straining with ambivalence, Lena St. Clair defines her mother as a “displaced person” who has difficulties expressing herself in English. Born in Wushi, near Shanghai, she speaks Mandarin and only a little English. Lena’s father, who spoke only a few canned Chinese expressions, always insisted that his wife learn English. Unable to express herself clearly in English, she communicates through gestures and looks and sometimes in a broken English punctuated by hesitations and frustration. Her husband thus feels justified in putting words in her mouth (106).

The mothers’ inability to speak perfect American English has multiple ramifications. For one thing, as they themselves have not lived in a foreign country, the daughters are left with the false impression that their mothers are not intelligent. As a result, the daughters often feel justified in believing that their mothers have nothing worthwhile to say. Furthermore, when mother and daughter share neither the same realm of experience and knowledge nor the same concerns, their differences are not marked by a slip of the tongue or the lack of linguistic adroitness or even by a generational gap, but rather by a deep geographical and cultural cleft. When the mother talks about American ways, the daughter is willing to listen; when the mother shows her Chinese ways, the daughter ignores her. The mother is thus unable to teach her daughter the Chinese ways of obeying parents, of listening to the mother’s mind, of hiding her thoughts, of knowing her own worth without becoming vain, and, most important of understanding why “Chinese thinking is best” (254).

The gulf between the Old World and the New, between Chinese mother and American daughter, is exacerbated by the ethnic and racial biases against the Chinese that the young daughter has to deal with on a regular basis. A conversation between Waverly and her mother, Lindo Jong, shows that even as a young child, the daughter is fully aware of the hurtful effect these prejudices have had on the Chinese mother, who has not adjusted well to the life and customs of the new land. One night, while Lindo Jong is brushing her daughter’s hair, Waverly, who has overheard a boy in her class discuss Chinese torture, wickedly asks her the following question: “Ma, what is Chinese torture?” Visibly disturbed by this question, Lindo Jong sharply nicks her
daughter’s skull with a hairpin. She then softly but proudly answers that Chinese people are proficient in many areas. They “do business, do medicine, do painting . . . do torture. Best torture” (91).

While the Chinese mother seems able readily to shrug off the detrimental influence of ethnic and racial biases, she cannot help but feel the effect of them upon her daughter. Lindo Jong is unable to overcome the painful reality that sets her apart from her daughter. She is ashamed because she knows that the daughter she is so proud of is ashamed of her and of her Chinese ways (255). The constantly growing cleavage of ethnic and national identity drives the daughter to make persistent efforts to Americanize herself in order to lessen her mother’s commanding influence.

The daughters’ battles for autonomy and independence from powerful imposing mothers are relentless, and the confrontations between mothers and daughters are fierce. In the chapter “Without Wood,” daughter Rose Hsu Jordan describes the decision she made as a child in her dream to pick a different doll from the one her mother expected her to choose (186). Another daughter, Jing-mei, adopts a self-defensive strategy against her mother’s expectation that she be a child prodigy by disappointing her whenever she can. She does this by getting average grades, by not becoming class president, by not being accepted into Stanford University, and finally by dropping out of college (142). By consistently failing her mother, Jing-mei manages to assert her own will.

The struggle between mother and daughter is equally ferocious. It often takes the form of psychological warfare between the two. Waverly Jong, a child prodigy chess player, envisages this struggle as a chess game in which her mother is transformed into a fierce opponent whose eyes are reduced to “two angry black slits” (100). The struggle is also expressed in physical and verbal fights. When, for example, the daughter Lena St. Clair overhears a mother and daughter who live next door shouting and fighting, she is not overly surprised when she learns from the daughter that both of them “do this kind of stuff all the time” (142).

This type of painful and dramatic confrontation also characterizes the relationship between Jing-mei Woo and her mother, Suyuan. Following a rather violent physical fight, Jing-mei Woo accuses her mother of wanting her to be someone she is not. Suyuan responds to this accusation by telling her that only two types of daughters exist: obedient daughters and disobedient daughters. Following this pronouncement, the daughter screams that she wishes that she was not her mother’s daughter. When Suyuan reminds her that this is something that cannot be changed, Jing-mei utters the worst possible thing that a Chinese daughter could ever say to her mother: “Then I wish I’d never been born! I wish I were dead! Like them” (142). This “them”