

Spiritual reassessment and moral reconciliation

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



In Fay Weldon's opinion, a good writer does not always need to conclude his story with a joyous flourish in order to satisfy his reader. "The writers, I do believe, who get the best and most lasting response from readers are the writers who offer a happy ending through moral development. By a happy ending, I do not mean mere fortunate events - a marriage or a last-minute rescue from death - but some kind of spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation, even with the self, even at death." Both *Moby Dick* and *The Joy Luck Club* leave a lasting impression on the reader because, although the resolution to each novel is not necessarily a happy one, a spiritual reassessment or moral reconciliation is reached in the end. In *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab faces death as his moral penance, and in *The Joy Luck Club*, Jing-Mei Woo finds a spiritual resolution by fulfilling her mother's destiny. Captain Ahab, the leader of the Pequod's whaling expedition, is appropriately named after an Israelite king who worshipped idols and drew upon himself the wrath of God. There is no small connection between Ahab and his namesake - Ahab, in a similar way to the ancient king, makes an idol out of the whale, Moby Dick. His desire for vengeance upon the creature that endowed him with a leg of ivory grows into a powerful, mind-consuming obsession. The first time he addresses his crew, he informs them that their quest is not a commercial one - they are setting out to kill the White Whale. "Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!" (165) From this point on, Ahab, like "madness maddened," (166) pursues the whale relentlessly - "he seemed ready to sacrifice all mortal interests to that one passion." (210) He does not heed the warnings of others and he is filled with arrogance, or, as Ishmael calls it, "fatal pride." Not only

is Ahab filled with great hubris as he makes himself a tyrant over his ship - "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod," he says (471) - but he does not heed any of the divine signals to desist from his mad quest. He receives many signs from heaven to give up, yet he ignores each of them, and rebukes the man who entreats him to take note of them. "God is against thee, old man!" (501) says one of his men. "All good angels [are] mobbing thee with warnings: what more wouldst thou have?" (552) But Ahab will not be cautioned. He is hell-bent on capturing Moby Dick, whom he sees as a representation of evil. And, indeed, the whale is depicted as a malignant, inscrutable, seemingly omnipotent force - but this is no excuse for the arrogance and cruelty exercised by Ahab. At one point, the captain from a passing ship entreats him to help in the search for his lost son, but Ahab coldly refuses. "I will not do it," he says, "Even now I lose time." (523) Ahab truly seems to be a madman. Ahab's story, at times, seems to run quite parallel to the story of Jonah, recounted earlier in the novel in a sermon by Father Mapple. Jonah does not heed the words of God, and he flees from him, in a way similar to how Ahab flees to the sea in pursuit of Moby Dick, heedless of all warnings. Unlike Jonah, however, Ahab does not repent. He, too, is conquered by the whale, but God does not deliver him as he does Jonah. If Ahab had shown humility, or heeded the warnings given to him, he may yet have survived his encounter with Moby Dick. But he is not one bit humble - "I never yet saw him kneel," says Stubb of Ahab. (229) Because of Ahab's hubris, and his mad, consuming passion to hunt Moby Dick that causes him to lose all sense of identity and even humanity, he is faced with divine retribution. He meets his demise by

means of the one thing he sought to destroy, the great whale. Although this is not a happy ending to the story, it is still a resolution of conflict, and it leaves the reader feeling satisfied. Captain Ahab earns what he deserves in the end – his arrogance and recklessness lead him to the proper punishment. His death, and the victory of the whale, both serve as a sort of moral and spiritual reconciliation to the story. The fact that his death takes place after a three-day journey is also significant – it may be likened to the three days during which Jesus journeyed from his crucifixion to his resurrection, or found his spiritual retribution. Ahab's retribution, at the end of the three days, is not resurrection, but death. The Joy Luck Club is quite a different tale from Moby Dick, but it likewise ends with a spiritual reconciliation. Throughout the novel, the main conflict is the lack of understanding between the Chinese mothers who have been born and raised in China and have experienced great sorrows, and their American-raised daughters who have never tasted real suffering. This theme is summarized in the beginning of the first book, "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," which opens with a short narrative about a Chinese mother coming to America. She buys a swan and sails across the ocean, dreaming about the better life she is going to provide for her daughter. "Nobody will look down on her... And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!" (3) The woman means to give her daughter the swan as a symbol of her hopes – but the swan is taken away, and she is left with only a feather. The mother wishes to give her daughter the feather, but she fears that her daughter will not understand its significance – she has grown up "swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow." (3) This story underlines the theme than runs throughout the entire novel –

the gap in understanding between the mothers and daughters, and the daughters' inability to comprehend their mothers' pasts. In all of the stories told by the mothers, Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair, emphasis is placed on the honor and respect that they each had for their own mothers. An-Mei describes a scene she witnessed when she was young, when her exiled mother returned home to the death-bed of An-Mei's grandmother. An-Mei's mother cut a piece of flesh from her own arm to place in her grandmother's soup, in attempt to cure her mother with an ancient Chinese tradition. " This is how a daughter honors her mother," says An-Mei. (41) " Here is how I came to love my mother. How I saw in her my own true nature. What was beneath my skin. Inside my bones." (40) This is the type of love, honor, and respect that the Chinese mothers came to expect in their relationships with their own daughters. But because their daughters were born and raised in America, a gap grew between them. Not only did they speak different languages, they lived completely different lives and had completely different understandings. The women in the novel must struggle to comprehend one another. " We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others," Ying-Ying says of her relationship with her daughter, Lena. (64) The inability of the daughters to understand their mothers' pasts is made clear when Waverly makes the mistake of telling her mother she is from Taiwan. " I'm not from Taiwan!... I was born in China, in Taiyuan," says Waverly's mother. (203) This literal misunderstanding is symbolic of a much greater rift between the mothers and daughters - how can the daughters, who grew up speaking perfect American English and swallowing Coca-Cola, possibly know the sorrow of

having to murder your own child? Of being forced to leave your family and marry into another? Of having your mother sacrifice her life so that you may live a better one? The story of Jing-Mei Woo and the relationship she has with her mother is probably the most important of all. Her mother, Suyuan, was forced to give up her two baby girls during a war in China. She spends her life trying to locate her lost children, but it is not until after her death that they are found. It is Jing-Mei who must go to China to meet the girls, and reconcile herself to her mother's past. Up until the point where Jing-Mei must do this, she has never really understood her mother. When she was first informed of her duty to go meet her sisters, she was unsure of what she would say about her mother: "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything. She was my mother." (31) The other mothers are appalled. "They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America." (31) But by going to China and meeting her two sisters, Jing-Mei reunites them with their mother's spirit. She creates a resolution to the life of her mother, a spiritual reconciliation to her mother's past. As she embraces her sisters, she says, "Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish." (332) In this act of fulfilling her mother's destiny, Jing-Mei symbolically unites all of the mothers and daughters in the story, finally bridging the rift in understanding, the gap between the past and present. Though the stories of *Moby Dick* and *The Joy Luck Club* are quite different, they both involve a long journey and a thematic conflict which, at the end, is resolved by either a spiritual reassessment or a moral reconciliation. Captain

Ahab earns the fate that his arrogance and recklessness deserve, which is death. Jing-Mei Woo bridges the gap between past and present to unite the understandings of the mothers and daughters. Each is, in itself, a satisfying ending.