

Amy tan's use of  
prologues to bridge  
the gap between  
chinese and  
american culture...



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Cultural divides are difficult to overcome in storytelling, because readers must both re-orient their largest cultural assumptions and understand the ideas of specific, unique characters. However, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan effectively makes much of Chinese culture comprehensible to American readers. In describing a culture that is exceedingly different from the American way of life, Tan presents both cultures side by side in order to draw attention to their differences. One way she accomplishes this task is through the use of prologues that frame each of the four sections of the book. Each prologue gives the reader a cultural perspective, which allows for better interpretations of the book's sections. These prologues unite the short story sections and as the prologues themselves come together to form one story, they bring the collection together as a whole to form an in-depth look at Chinese culture's survival in American society. Amy Tan uses section prologues to establish viewpoints from which to observe and interpret each section while establishing general conflicts facing the characters in the short story collection; the prologues progress from identifying the problem to suggesting the continuance of cultural heritage, they help to bridge the cultural gap between the mothers and daughters in the story.

The prologue for "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" depicts the relocation of a woman to a new country and the resulting cultural problems this type of relocation entails, which turns out to be the main conflict of Tan's short story collection. The story in the first prologue recounts a woman's immigration from China to America. She voices her optimism about America and the wonderful life it will give her daughter. The swan she is traveling with symbolizes both her life in China and the hope she has for her daughter in

the New World. However, the swan is taken from her as she goes through customs, leaving her with only a feather to pass on to her daughter. This exhibits the loss of culture that takes place during relocation and identifies the reality facing the Chinese mothers in the book: “ Tan’s structural narrative opening marks the way ‘ America’ strips the woman of her past, her idealized hopes for the future in the United States, and excludes her from an ‘ American’ national identity” (Romagnolo 270). This prologue enlightens an American audience on the dilemmas faced by immigrants in order to garner sympathy for the mothers in the story who could be misinterpreted without this background information. In the end of the story, the woman is left with only a feather to pass on to her daughter, which calls the reader’s attention to the feeble connection between Chinese-born parents and American-born children. This insufficient connection or inability to pass on culture and history to their daughters is what the mothers of the story fear. In this sense, the prologue establishes the stereotypical Chinese-born mother and the following set of four chapters elaborates on this model by illustrating both the fear of the mothers for their daughters and their troubled pasts that have led them to pursue better lives for their daughters.

With the prologue’s depiction of a mother’s fear of cultural disconnect, the chapters comprising “ Feathers from a Thousand Li Away” confirm the existence of such fear among the mothers, which in turn establishes the mothers as sympathetic characters and gives an emotional curve by which the reader can judge them. In this section, as Jing-mei comes to terms with the death of her mother, she consequently realizes how far removed she is from her culture and heritage. After her mother’s death, Jing-mei is expected

to take her place at the Joy Luck Club, and she realizes she is ill equipped to do so. On top of feeling distanced from the other women, she feels she cannot take her mother's place in the family. She is told about her mother's quest to find her daughters and that she must carry on this duty and educate them on who their mother was to which Jing-mei replies, "What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything. She was my mother" (Tan 31). This admission conveys Jing-mei's disconnect from her culture and appalls the other mothers because they fear the same attitude is present in their own daughters. An-mei exclaims, "Not know your own mother? ... How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!" (Tan 31). This passage "articulates the anguish of the forgotten and obliterated, of not having progeny who would look back at ancestral ties with the past. All the mothers, Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, Ying-ying St. Clair, fear this genealogical obliteration" (Zenobia 254). This section illustrates the generational disconnect predicted in the prologue and establishes the main conflict of the collection: the cultural gap between Chinese-born mothers and American-born daughters.

After the establishment of the story's main conflict, the prologue to the "Twenty-Six Malignant Gates" section shows the nature and extent of the cultural gap between Chinese mothers and their American-born daughters while garnering sympathy for the daughters in the story. The mother attempts to instruct the daughter by interpreting a Chinese book titled Twenty-Six Malignant Gates. The use of a Chinese text to justify a strict parenting style reveals the typical mothering technique among Chinese mothers, which could appear a bit overbearing to an American reader. This is

an important cultural difference to address because “ an American reader is less likely to grant those mothers their due without understanding that Asian mothers normally behave in a more heavy-handed manner than their American counterparts” (Souris 137). However, the effect of this prologue is twofold. The overbearing nature of the mother also establishes the view from which to examine the daughter's attitude and actions, which translates to the examination of each daughter in the main narrative: “ If the first preface prepares us to be sympathetic towards the mothers, this second preface prepares us to be sympathetic towards the daughters as we read each monologue against that preface as a backdrop” (Souris 129). As the prologue prepares the reader for the stories of the daughters, it establishes a tangible cultural gap rather than the anticipated one referenced in the first prologue, which cements the rising conflict. The next anticipatory action is at the end of the second prologue when the daughter goes against the mother's warnings and ends up falling. This foreshadows the negative consequences this gap between the two generations will have for the daughters in the story.

The sympathy garnered for the daughters in the story aides the interpretation of the “ Twenty-Six Malignant Gates” section, where the daughters assume control of the narrative and exhibit both their disregard for the wisdom of their mothers as they deal with hardships. Rose mentions the book referenced in the prologue and claims that the book shows “ that children were predisposed to certain dangers on certain days, all depending on their Chinese birthdate... And even though the birthdates corresponded to only one danger, my mother worried about them all” (Tan 131-132). Rose is

using this observation to establish her mother's overbearing nature.

However, in the same way that the prologue's effect is twofold, Rose's observation both criticizes her mother's parenting strategy and reveals the cultural roots for such a parenting method. With the mention of the Chinese book, An-mei's overbearing nature as a mother is tied to her Chinese culture, which paints children as prone to danger and in need of strong parental guidance. With this distinction, Rose's observation of her mother reveals her parenting method to be more protective than oppressive. This realization is aided by both preceding prologues because the first one garners sympathy for the mothers, which causes an American audience to look beyond the overbearing Chinese mother, and the second prologue garners sympathy for the daughters in the story, which causes the reader to understand the attitudes of the daughters. This type of misunderstanding is the root problem of the short story collection: "The story is a tragedy of incomprehension resulting from a clash of cultural values and generational divide. The mother belongs to the old world order and believes in the inalienable right of the mother to regulate and run the life of the daughter" (Priya).

Following the juxtaposition of the Chinese opinions of the mothers and the conflicting American views of the daughters, Amy Tan sets the scene for the "American Translation" section by giving the reader a parable that identifies the details of the disconnect between the mothers and daughters. She does this by illustrating the difference between the American and the Chinese viewpoint. Harold Bloom illustrates the purpose of this prologue by observing, "The prologue sets the tone and the reasons for the tensions and conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship" (7). In the parable, the mother

and the daughter gaze into a mirror. The mother, who symbolizes the Chinese way, exclaims, “ In this mirror is my future grandchild, already sitting on my lap next spring” (Tan 159). Her eyes are set on the future and the continuation of her family. The daughter looks into the mirror and simply sees “ her own reflection looking back at her” (Tan 159). This conveys the American worldview, which focuses on the present and the individual alone. Tan uses this mirror symbolism again when Lindo Jong is in the salon with her daughter. When she sees her daughter in the mirror, she sees herself and her own mother. With this reflection showing the past and the other story's reflection showing the future, the Chinese worldview is illustrated in its entirety because it focuses on both the past and future with little regard for the present, which is the focus of the American worldview. This dynamic carries through the entire story as the mothers, who were raised the Chinese way, watch their daughters grow up in the American way. Ying-Ying describes this as a difficult way to raise a child by stating, “ I raised a daughter, watching her from another shore. I accepted her American ways” (Tan 286). Their daughters grow up with a different focus in life and therefore become strange to their mothers because of the different worldviews. However, the recurring idea in the book is that “ if you are Chinese you can never let go of China in your mind” (Tan 203). While this sentiment is confusing to the daughters in the beginning of the book, the mothers know it to be true, and the daughters slowly come to believe it as well.

After the establishment of the cultural gap and the stress it has on the mother-daughter relationship, the “ American Translation” section of the

book, which is narrated by the daughters, exemplifies the conflict between American and Chinese viewpoints and begins to move towards a solution through nature imagery. In “ Without Wood,” Rose embodies this conflict. Ted takes advantage of Rose and makes her feel insignificant. After their separation, she goes out to view the garden in the yard and remembers how Ted would tend to the garden constantly and control every aspect of the planting and maintenance. He arranged them in different boxes, which allows plants to grow only under his controlling supervision. As she overlooks the overrun garden, Rose recalls something she read in a fortune cookie: “ When a husband stops paying attention to the garden, he’s thinking of pulling up roots” (Tan 215). This is significant because with the way Ted gardened, with the plants in different and specific boxes, the root systems and the plants themselves would have been tame and easy to pull up. This is meant to convey the American way of life, which sees little connection with the past, making it easy to change and leave. However, Rose realizes this inconsistent way of life creates an unstable foundation on which to stand. As she views the overgrown garden with its strong, interconnected roots, she decides she prefers this to the well-kept garden because there is “ no way to pull [the roots] out once they’ve buried themselves in the masonry; you’d end up pulling the whole building down” (Tan 218). With its interconnected and grounded roots, the garden symbolizes Rose’s Chinese heritage, which provides her a sound foundation on which to stand. With this newfound strength, she stands up to Ted and demands the house in the divorce rather than letting him simply throw her out. Because of the prologue, this event is classified as a return to her Chinese heritage or the Chinese mindset as her American view centered on the present is widened to include her past. This <https://assignbuster.com/amy-tans-use-of-prologues-to-bridge-the-gap-between-chinese-and-american-culture/>



strengthens her because she realizes she has a strong Chinese identity and, as a result, obtains a new sense of self.

Once the specific conditions of disconnect between the two generations have been set down, the next preface illustrates a passing of the torch to the daughters in the story while voicing uncertainty for their preparedness for such a burden. In the prologue to "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," a grandmother is seen voicing her parental uncertainties to her granddaughter. This prologue produces an effect similar to that of the first prologue: "Very sympathetic to the mother, this preface prepares us to organize the monologues we are about to encounter in a manner that is sympathetic to the mothers" (Souris 130). The grandmother claims she has raised her daughter the way she was raised in order to properly prepare her, but she questions whether or not this was correct or if it has truly prepared her daughter. The baby laughs at her musings, which causes the grandmother to scold her: "You say you are laughing because you have already lived forever, over and over again?" (Tan 239). She sees in her granddaughter another American-born child who will refuse to listen to her mother and will believe she knows better. The grandmother scolds her for this perceived insult. This questioning of her own parenting skills and seeing the future of her own daughter as a mother signifies the grandmother passing the torch to her daughter. It is now up to the daughter to raise her child and carry on tradition, no matter how ill-equipped the grandmother may think the daughter is at doing so. This torch carries with it a new level of responsibility for the daughter generation in the book.

This passing of the torch and the effects of this new cultural responsibility bridges the gap between the two generations as symbolized at the end of the book by the jade pendant that Suyuan passed down to Jing-mei. Suyuan Woo gives her daughter a jade pendant and tells her, “ 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” (Tan 235). The necklace symbolizes her Chinese heritage, which is why Jing-mei does not wear the necklace until after her mother’s death. She lives the Americanized way of life until the death of her mother, after which she feels a need to understand and return to her Chinese roots. She recalls her mother’s words about the jade as she contemplates its meaning: “ This is young jade. It is a very light color now, but if you wear it every day it will become more green” (Tan 235). This charge for her to wear the pendant every day is Suyuan’s attempt to constantly remind Jing-mei about her heritage. Because of the prologue, the reader perceives this as a passing of the torch where it is now up to Jing-mei to carry on Chinese culture. In describing the process of darkening the jade with wear, Suyuan is conveying that the future is just as important as the past. Jing-mei needs to remember the past and the heritage she stands on, but she also needs to darken the necklace, which symbolizes building upon her heritage in order to pass on a stronger foundation to her children. Therefore, Suyuan’s description of the necklace as “ life’s importance” bears the Chinese worldview, which is described in the third prologue as having the past and future as the main focus of everyone’s lives. The fact that Jing-mei chooses to wear the necklace after her mother’s death shows that, like Rose, she has returned to her heritage and the ways of her mother. With this decision, she quells the fears of the lady in the prologue, who seems unsure

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of her results as a parent and the resulting ability of her daughter to carry on her culture. In the end, Jing-mei returns to her heritage and understands her mother as well as she can.

Despite the changing viewpoints in her book, Amy Tan conveys these stories in sections with thematic explanations in the form of prologues, creating an in-depth view into both Chinese culture and the effect of immigration on it. Each prologue prepares the reader by establishing the situation of Chinese Americans, which is something that would be foreign to a wide range of readers. They also aid the reader in understanding Chinese culture as a whole, which otherwise could seem harsh to the average reader. It establishes a viewpoint from which to observe and judge each set of stories. It is important to have a cultural background for these stories in the same way that it is important for the daughters in the story to have their mothers' cultural backgrounds to facilitate understanding: "Incomplete cultural knowledge impedes understanding on both sides, but it particularly inhibits the daughters from appreciating the delicate negotiations their mothers have performed to sustain their identities across two cultures" (Hamilton 196). The cultural gap between the reader and the characters in the story must first be closed in order to perceive the closing of the cultural gap within the story. Tan accomplishes this task with the four prologues. In the end, the prologues tie the stories together. When viewed chronologically, the prologues can be observed as one parable surrounding two characters: an immigrant mother and an American-born daughter. In the same way that the prologues can be joined as one story, the stories within the collection can be united in order to portray a multifaceted image of Chinese culture and the

stresses that face immigrants attempting to find their identity somewhere between the two cultures.

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