

# Gish jen college essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the short story "The White Umbrella" the narrator and her sister Mona find themselves in a dilemma when they find out that their mother has a job. Needing to be at their piano lesson at 4:00 they decided to start walking despite the giant grey clouds above. They arrive at Miss Crosman's house (the piano teacher) soaked to the bone.

While in the room the narrator notices a very nice white umbrella. After their lessons were all over Miss Crosman asks if they want to wait inside due to the weather. But the sisters reply "Our mother will be here any minute. Half an hour later Miss Crosman offers the sisters some pot roast, but the narrator insists that their mother will be arriving shortly, but Mona cracks and goes inside.

Miss Crosman goes inside and comes back out with the white umbrella. Miss Crosman gave the umbrella to the narrator. As soon as she gave the umbrella to the narrator they saw their mom's headlights come around the corner, quickly she shoved the umbrella up her skirt because that's what she asked for Christmas. Mona, noticing something up the narrator's skirt.

When they came to a red light their mother was blocking the crosswalk, so she threw the car in reverse without checking her rear view mirror and hit the car behind them. Relieved to have the attention diverted from her, the narrator throws the umbrella down the sewer drain when they get out of the car. Gish Jen's father left China for the United States to work on a project preparing for a hypothetical invasion of the Chinese mainland in 1945. The new Chinese Communist government prohibited him from returning. Jen grew up in Yonkers, New York and was born in 1955.

They were the only Chinese family in the area. Children would often taunt Gish and her family. They then moved to Scarsdale. “ Jen acquired the nickname ‘ Gish,’ which became the basis of her pen name, Gish Jen, while in high school, based on having the same first name as that of the silent film star Lillian Gish” (qtd. In “ Jen, Gish: Introduction” np). Gish Jen attended Stanford University business school in 1979, but she found herself drawn to fiction writing and dropped out of business school in her second year.

She took a job at Doubleday Books, but wasn’t satisfied. In the M. F. A. program at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she found what she loves doing. Jen graduated from Iowa University in 1983.

“ She then traveled to China, where she worked as an English-language instructor at a coal-mining institute” (qtd In” Jen, Gish: Introduction” np). She married David O’Connor and lived in California until 1985. They moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is where they currently live, and have two children. “‘I loved it,’ Jen recalls, ‘ I remember telling my roommate I loved writing and would do it for the rest of my life. ’” (qtd. In J.

D. Sloan 1247). Jen observed, ‘ Immigrants see America through different eyes: They see the potential, but they also see the shortcoming. They are the intimate outsider. ’ Jen further commented, “ In a way, the immigrant-or the immigrant literature of which I am a part-is pushing the limits and expanding the notion of America’s view of itself... Somehow, we must found a new American myth that is more inclusive of diversity than any of the myths we have had so far... We need to create a new notion of what it

means to be American, one that acknowledges our diversity” (“ Jen, Gish: Introduction” np).

Gish Jen’s inspiration for writing mostly comes from her personal experiences. Jen’s work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times*, as well as in a variety of anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. She has also published two books, *Typical American* (1991) and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996). “ Yuko Matsukawa commented, ‘ by guiding us through one Chinese immigrant family’s experience, [Jen] perceptively and brilliantly challenges readers to reexamine their definitions of home, family, the American dream, and, of course, what it is to be a ‘ typical American’” (qtd. In “ Jen, Gish: Introduction” np).

Gish Jen uses incredibly vivid descriptions, comparisons; and her use of dialogue very effectively portrays the theme/tone. For example, “ Aside from her ballooning breasts-which threatened to collide with the keyboard as she played- she had auburn hair, blue eyes, and, I noted with a particular pang, a pure white, folding umbrella. ” (Jen 124). Gish Jen’s very descriptive nature of writing gives us a clear depiction of what’s going on in the story.

This also helps us understand how that particular character feels about what they’re describing. Another very helpful device is a simile, “ The umbrella glowed like a scepter on the blue carpet”. Since a scepter is portrayed as a very magnificent object, this tells us how much she loves the umbrella. In another instance, “ I looked at it again, toying with the idea of asking for one

for Christmas. I knew, however, how my mother would react. ' Things,' she would say.

' What's the matter with a raincoat? All you want is things, just like an American. '" (Jen125-126). When she says " just like an American", I believe she is trying to depict what it's like to be a Chinese-American, not just Chinese. This is the theme of the story, what does it mean to be American? As Gish Jen would put it.

For another example, " It sprang up by itself as if it were alive, as if that were what it wanted to do-as if it belonged in my hands, above my head" (Jen 129). Her use of personification shows us her desire for the umbrella. This also develops her characters very nicely. These are just a few examples of how Gish Jen effectively uses literary devices. Critics love the way Gish Jen uses the English language and how she questions what it means to be American. For example, " Jen steps outside of the ' ethnic writer' role in the sense that she does not focus primarily on ethnicity, but instead challenges the reader to ask him/herself what it means to be American" (qtd.

In " Gish Jen"). I agree with this critic's statement. All throughout Jen's work you will find that her characters will strive for the American dream and what it means to be American. Another example would be, " While many of her protagonists are Chinese or of Chinese decent, her goal is not to educate readers about the foreign world of Chinese American culture, but instead to ask her audience to consider the changing face of the American Identity" (qtd. In " Gish Jen"). While it is true that many of her protagonists are

Chinese, I do not agree that she does not try to educate us about Chinese American culture.

You can't write about Chinese American people growing up and not try to educate us on to their world. In another example, "Jen's characters are complex individuals who undergo transformations not based on essential formulas of ethnic identity" (qtd. In "Gish Jen" np). I believe this to be true. Because in her short story "The White Umbrella" the narrator at first wants the umbrella but when she finally gets it she throws it down a sewer drain, which has nothing to do with ethnic identity. For my fourth example, "And also because her writing has a power of unexpected attack in useful stretching up to now so as to ready it for this Chinese-American voice.

When a writer writes as well as Jen, the Language itself becomes the narrative and the characters" (qtd. In Eder 70). Gish Jen by all means knows how to use the English language to its full extent. But I wouldn't say the entire English language was invented just for her to write with it.

In another instance, "Up to then, they had been Americanizing slowly and cautiously" (qtd. In Eder 71). I find this statement to be true. Because typically in China the mothers weren't supposed to work, but in "The White Umbrella" the mother got a part time job. For my final example, "Jen has done much more than tell an immigrant story, a story of the clash of Chinese culture and American reality.

" This is a very brilliant quote; the narrator says she wishes that she could twirl an umbrella above her head like all of the other girls. But when she finally gets the white umbrella from Miss Crosman, she ends up throwing it

down a sewer drain after getting in a car accident. Gish Jen is a very talented writer; these quotes are enough to confirm that. From the crummy part of town to Cambridge Massachusetts, married with two children, Gish Jen is by far a very fascinating Chinese-American writer.

Her works question how America views itself and not how it views its immigrants. So what does it really mean to be American? Works Cited " Jen, Gish: Introduction. " Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed.

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