

Analyzing short stories

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



"Two Kinds" by Amy Tan

The story "Two Kinds," by Amy Tan is just one of the stories about the relationship between mothers and daughters in the book, *The Joy Luck Club*. We start this story with a mother, a Chinese immigrant to the United States, telling her American born daughter, Jing-mei, at a very young age that she can become anything she wants to become in America; more specifically, a prodigy of some sort. We witness the mother's search for what kind of prodigy she will turn her daughter into and at the same time we see the sorts of tests she puts her daughter through in her quest to make something of her. Jing-mei quickly grows tired and annoyed with her mother's judgmental pursuits to turn her into something she is not. Regardless, her mother persists and finally decides that her daughter will become a famous pianist. Jing-mei is immediately put into lessons and the family purchases a used piano. All of this comes to an ugly head when, after months of "practicing," her mother signs Jing-mei up for a talent show competition and to her mother's embarrassment Jing-mei shows once and for all that she is no child prodigy. This particular story deals with a mother's struggle to come to terms with her own Chinese heritage at the same time as she attempts to instill certain values in her American daughter. The central idea is that with the inherent differences between an immigrant parent and their first generation American child, can come friction between their thinking. The main character in this story is the daughter, Jing-mei. Other than that, her mother and her piano teacher, Mr. Chong, are the only other characters with large enough roles to merit discussion. Jing-mei is the narrator of the story and we learn a lot about her, her mother, and their relationship through her account of their interaction when she was young.

We learn about Jing-mei through indirect presentation because we are not told specifically about her traits but rather learn about her through her actions. She is a round and dynamic character. The most notable aspect of her character is her initial desire to please her mother and make her proud but how quickly her desire to fulfill those lofty expectations turned to shame and feelings of inadequacy when the reality set in that she was not extraordinary and simply being in America would not make her that way. These feelings are explained when she says, " And after seeing my mother's disappointed face once again, something inside me began to die" (Tan 195). Jing-mei is strong willed in the sense that she stands up to her mother's pressure and decides she cannot be someone she is not; she can only be who she is. She is dynamic insofar as that by the end of the story we know she is all grown up and now understands why her mother acted the way she did. Instead of being hurt and angry about it like she was as a young girl, she has forgiven her mother and no longer feels negatively about the way her mother pressured her. Jing-mei's mother is also a round and dynamic character. We learn that her tragic past in China is what gives her hope that in her American future, anything is possible. She uses her daughter to show this and as a second chance for the things she could not achieve. What is really just a mother wanting the best for her child gets read as a hard and overbearing woman. And finally, Mr. Chong is a minor character who is static and flat. He is there just to facilitate Jing-mei's rebellion against her mother and because he is mostly deaf and blind it makes it really easy for her to not excel at piano. The main conflict in this story is the struggle between Jing-mei and her mother for Jing-mei to become what her mother wants her to be

vs. becoming a woman on her own. This conflict is key in understanding the central idea because it shows the inherent and unavoidable differences that come up between a mother and daughter with essentially two completely different heritages. Because of her mother's extreme and tragic past, she is ultra-sensitive about making sure her daughter not only has a better life, but also somehow wants her to understand how good she has it. The problem is that Jing-mei has never come close to the experiences her mother had and cannot see her mother's desires for her to achieve certain things in the same light that her mother does. Instead, she interprets the pressure to achieve as her mother finding her inadequate. The resolution comes first at the recital when she also experiences the humiliation of not knowing how to play the song and later with age and experience and a found understanding of her mother's motives. The story takes place in Chinatown in San Francisco when the narrator is a young girl in the late 50s. Although there are a couple of instances when Jing-mei and her mother go places for some sort of training, the bulk of the story takes place in the family home either around the television in the living room or at the "Formica kitchen table" (Tan 195). The time is important to the story's development because it was in Jing-mei's younger years that the reality of her mother's past was the most apparent to her mother, and thus, had more of an effect on Jing-mei. Symbolism plays a major role in this story. For Jing-mei, Tan uses the piano itself as a symbol of the pressure to become something she is not that her mother inflicts upon her. For her mother it symbolizes the hope that coming to America gave her. Also, the author uses the two songs that Jing-mei discovers at the end of the story to symbolize her mental state as a young girl and what she has

matured into as a woman. The first one, the one that she played at the recital, was called, " Pleading Child" and the second one that she discovered for the first time years later, which was the other half of the first song was called, " Perfectly Contented." Tan also uses simile as a language device a number of times throughout her story. One example of this is when Jing-mei and her mother are arguing about her playing the piano and Jing-mei tells her mother she wishes she wasn't her daughter. Tan's description of Jing-mei's mother's withdrawal from the conversation is an ideal example of a simile, " ...her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless" (Tan 200). " The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson The story, " The Lottery," by Shirley Jackson begins in a small average American town of about 300 inhabitants. It is the summer time, June 27th, and based on the description, we know that today is a very special day for the town. The story starts with the description of a seemingly cheerful environment of " ...the fresh warmth of a full summer day; the flowers blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green" (Jackson 237). The boys are gathering stones and bringing them into the town square, while the girls watch from a distance, talking amongst themselves. We are told a little about the history of the annual lottery, but never told what the lottery is for. As the morning turns into afternoon, the rest of the villagers gather in the square along with the children. The three most powerful men in town lead the lottery drawing while the townspeople stir around with nervous excitement. They go in alphabetical order with each head of household drawing from the black lottery box until all households have been accounted

for. Whoever ends up with the piece of paper with a black dot on it has to go into the next round of drawing. That is, that each member of his/her family must draw to see who gets a second black dot. Once the lottery is narrowed down to one person the town gathers up the stones and stones the chosen person to death. The central idea of "The Lottery" is actually a metaphor that explores tradition and the unconscious implications of scapegoating. The two main characters in this story are Mr. Summers, the most powerful man in the town, and Tessie Hutchinson, the woman who is selected by the lottery to be sacrificed. Mr. Summers's character is meant to be an example of any man in power of a society. His name suggests that through his wealth his life has become quite easy and carefree. Because he also conducts the square dances, the teen-age club, and the Halloween program, it would seem that he is the epitome of civic duty. However, the contrasting purposes of these four activities is ironic and suggests to the guilt Mr. Summers feels for his willingness to be the leader of an obviously evil event. This character is key in Jackson's exploration of the central idea. Without a leader, the tradition could not be carried out. Mrs. Hutchinson is an average housewife which, based on the description of the townspeople, we know is the lowest rung on the social ladder after the children. She exemplifies anyone faced with death who has no control over his/her fate. She is a hypocrite for her willingness to take part in the stoning while also crying out about how unfair it is when she is the one chosen. However, because of the main idea of tradition, we know that the majority of people are likely to follow suit simply because something has been around for longer than they have, regardless of how they really feel about the act. The most obvious conflict in this story is

the struggle between Mrs. Hutchinson and the lottery itself. Even though as the reader, we are unsure of what the lottery is leading up to, we start to get the feeling that it is not as positive as we initially suspected. Mrs. Hutchinson's first struggle against the lottery is a subconscious one. The fact that she actually forgot that it was the day of the lottery says that in the back of her mind she wishes she could deny it completely. Once she loses the subconscious battle and realizes that it is the day of the lottery, she rushes to the town square hoping not to be late. Her next struggle is when she contests the first results of the drawing that put her family in the final round, " You didn't give him enough time to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair" (Jackson 241)! Mr. Summers and the other townspeople remind her that everyone takes the same chance and quickly make her be quiet. Next, she argues that her married daughter should have to draw. Again, she is reminded of the rules that put her daughter with her husband's family for lottery drawings. Finally, Mrs. Hutchinson is the last to select the paper with the black dot, which makes her the chosen one. She also fights this by screaming once again that it isn't fair. In the end, she loses the battle against the lottery and is stoned by the villagers. The outcome of the conflict in this story is that with the power of the people backing it up, the tradition of the lottery is resolute and unbeatable. As mentioned above, the setting plays a very important role in setting up the central idea of this story. By beginning with a mood of peacefulness and tranquility and slowly revealing the opposite throughout the story, Jackson uses the setting to foreshadow an ironic ending. Analysis of the setting will continue in the following paragraph about symbolism. I believe that Jackson uses symbolism in many aspects of

the story. There is an overall point she makes with symbolism that says that nothing is as it seems. More specifically, she posits that more often we find that many things appear good on the outside when they are in fact evil underneath. The setting is a key example of this. At first, we think the town described in "The Lottery" is a peaceful, happy little town. As we read more, little by little, we find that is absolutely not the case. Underlying that positive appearance is pure evil. Jackson also uses this symbolism in naming all of the characters in the story. The names she chose compared to the real traits of the characters support the notion that everybody hides their own evil nature behind pleasing guises. For example, Mr. Summers's name symbolizes life but in reality it is he who is in charge of the lottery, which instead of giving life to its winner, it gives death. Jackson also uses the color black as a symbol for evil and death in "The Lottery." The box which holds the fate of all of the townspeople is black and in bad shape. The dot on the paper that tells which person will be sacrificed is also black. And finally, Mr. Summers's coal business, the most valuable business in town is also associated with the color black. None of these examples were accidents of Shirley Jackson. "The House on Mango Street" by Sandra Cisneros This short story starts with the main character, the narrator, telling us about all of the houses she remembers living in and about the house she and her family live in now. She explains how as the family grew; there became more of a need to move to places that would accommodate all of them. We know from her descriptions that the family is poor and none of these living arrangements were really big enough for all six of them and have not been very nice. At the end, they have finally moved into a house, one that they own, but still the

narrator knows through other personal experiences that this house is still not "very good." "Good" in that she knows her family is poor. The central idea of "The house on Mango Street" is that through personal experiences one is able to determine what kind of person they are, their views on life, their place in the world and the outlook of their future. The main character of this story is the girl who is narrating. She seems shy and vulnerable to others' opinions. For example, when she sees a nun from her school on the street in front of the flat she and her family lived in, she realized quickly after showing the nun where she lived that she should somehow feel negatively about it. The girl is also impressionable. She knows through hearing her parents tell her siblings and her throughout their childhood that "one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year. And our house would have running water and pipes that worked. And...real stairs...a basement and at least three washrooms..." (Cisneros 263) that their current living situation was not really acceptable. This aspect of the main character relates to the central idea because it is through her vulnerability and attention paid to what others think that she determines that she is in poverty and what poverty means for her as a person. The supporting characters in this story are the girl's family, Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, and Nenny. We know more about her mother and father than her siblings. We know her parents are caring because they want a better life for their children. We also know that they are dreamers and are optimistic about the future. They dream of the house they will one day have and believe it is actually possible. The main conflict of this story is the conflict between the girl and the way she feels about her place in the world.

She knows that she is in a bad place, one that is undesirable to most, and that she wants better. At this point in her life, the end of this story, she is not feeling very optimistic about her future and being able to find a better life. The current resolution is that she is losing to her negative feelings about the future. She has witnessed her family's struggle for her entire life and does not have evidence that things can get better for them or her. The story takes place in the house on Mango Street during an unknown time in an unknown city. An extension of the setting is also in the narrator's descriptions of the other houses she and her family lived in. We know that all of their previous residences have come with conditions such as, paying rent, having to be careful not to make too much noise because of neighbors, sharing a yard, and broken water pipes. Their current house is better because they do own it and don't owe rent to anyone, but it is also lacking in many areas. It is small and red with tiny windows. It doesn't have a front yard and has an extremely small backyard that is dwarfed by the two buildings that surround it. And worst of all, there is only one bedroom and one bathroom for the entire family to share. The setting is used to explain the girl's feelings about her place in the world. We can assume from her descriptions of the places she's lived and how she feels about them, that they are an extension of how she feels about herself. Cisneros makes use of personification as a device to explain the tiny windows of the house on Mango Street. She says the " ... windows [were] so small you'd think they were holding their breath" (Cisneros 263). She also uses symbolism in the story to explain the girl's feelings about her place in the world. The houses she lived in and lives in now are symbols for the type of person she is. The girl uses these residences

and people's reactions to them to draw on to define herself. "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant is a story about the life of Mathilde Loisel. She is a poor woman who married poor and is now living a life that she does not think highly of. When her husband acquires tickets to an important event, she borrows a necklace from one of her friends to look her best at the event. She has a great time but at the end of the evening she loses the necklace and goes into great debt to replace it. After the debt is paid off and she lives a life of misery, she encounters the lady who lent her the necklace. The lady informs her that the necklace was a phony and that she could have spared all of her troubles if she hadn't tried to be something she is not. The central idea of the story is to be happy with who you are and never try to be something you are not for there are consequences for those who covet. The story focuses on a tragic event where Mathilde Loisel, the main character loses a borrowed necklace. She is a dynamic character. She starts out as a beautiful woman, "she was one of those pretty and charming women born" (Maupassant 5) and ends up like a common poor lady, "she had become the strong, hard, and rude woman of poor households" (Maupassant 11). She is materialistic and possessions are very important to her, "She had no decent dresses, no jewels, nothing. And she loved nothing but these..." (Maupassant 6). She found so much meaning in such items that the story itself is based on the fear of people finding out about an object she was so ashamed to admit she lost. She had shallow desires to be wealthy and live a life of luxury, "...she imagined a gourmet-prepared main course carried on the most exquisite trays and served on the most beautiful dishes..." (Maupassant 6). Opposite of Mathilde is her

husband, Mr. Loisel. He is happy with his life and is grateful for simple everyday things. As he sits down to dinner he says, " Ah, good old boiled beef! I don't know anything better" (Maupassant 6)! Unlike his wife, he is not interested in expensive things. This is shown when he suggests she wear flowers rather than jewelry to the event. When his wife loses the necklace he doesn't even blame her or get mad at her; he just considers it his responsibility to help her find a replacement necklace. He is also generous which is shown when he spends 400 francs that he had saved up to go hunting on a dress that might make his wife happy. He represents the benevolent character in the story whose function is to balance things out. The conflict arises in this story when Mathilde loses the necklace she borrowed from her friend. One may think that the conflict would be between Mathilde and Mrs. Forrstier about the missing necklace, but that is not the case. In this story the conflict is an internal one between Mathilde's desire to be of high social standing and who she really is. The result of this conflict is that Mathilde ends up in a worse situation financially than she began with due to her trying to look wealthier than she is. This resolution lends to the story's central idea in that there was a consequence to Mathilde's not embracing who she is. This story takes place in the late 19th century, in Paris, France. Through the descriptions of Mathilde's fantasy life, the reader gets a picture of what Paris looked like for the wealthy and how elegant and comfortable their lives must have been. We know that in Paris at this time the wealthy would have had " ...large drawing rooms draped in the most expensive silks, with fine end tables...dainty private rooms...decorated with oriental tapestries and lighted by bronze floor lamps..." (Maupassant 5).

Without the description of her fantasies we wouldn't know what the setting was like and would not understand as much about Mathilde's motivations. A number of literary devices are used in this story, one of which being irony. When Mr. and Mrs. Loisel are about to leave the jewelry store, the jeweler says, " You will have a lifetime to enjoy these diamonds." This statement is an example of Irony because in making the statement, the jeweler means the beauty of the necklace will be hers to enjoy; but the Loisels and the reader know that far from being a pleasure, the diamonds are likely to give her a lifetime of work and hardship; the opposite of the implied meaning of the statement. Another language tool Maupassant uses is symbolism. The idea that Mathilde has of the necklace in the beginning of the story is a symbol for the life she wishes she had.