

Different types of losses in the joy luck club novel

Literature



The Joy Luck Club: Lost and Found

In *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, the daughter of Suyuan, Jing-Mei Woo (aka "June"), experiences many different types of losses to which she later finds answers for her prying need for identity through an extraordinary journey of self discovery and courage in response to her mother's death.

The beginning of the book starts to establish a narrative from June. There is a sense of shock in her, in that it hasn't quite sunk in that her mother is dead. She has lost her mother, but her spirit still remains in the voices around her. She describes listening to various people describe the cause of her mother's death; from the doctor saying it was a cerebral aneurysm, to June's father saying that he thinks she was killed by her own thoughts. June's mother, Suyuan Woo, was the founder of the Joy Luck Club. Suyuan always described the Joy Luck Club as something of a gathering to relieve the daily stresses of life after her engraved journey through China to San Francisco. It was from the inspiration of the Joy Luck Club that June always heard stories from her mother regarding her life before June was born. June notes that she hears her mother's friends say that her mother died "...just like a rabbit, quickly, and with unfinished business left behind" (Tan 19).

June never took her mother's story of the Joy Luck Club too seriously, until after her mother passed. Her mother always told her the story when they were sitting idle after a meal and was bored. June reflects on the story that her mother told her about her encounters in Kweilin, and realizes only after it starts to sink in that her mother is dead, that she took listening to the tale for granted. Because of June's indirect relationship with China, being

Chinese-American, she doesn't feel the same losses that her mother described having, but now she has an urge to empathize. The story was always the same, except for the ending, which June describes as growing darker, casting long shadows into her life (Tan 21).

June's mother was consistently critical of her, which made June feel like she was never good enough. This caused June to always try and impress her mother by making sacrifices to appease her. June lost her identity along the way trying to become what she always thought her mother wanted her to be. Later, June realizes that she misconstrued her mother's expectations, and felt like she was being criticized and shamed, when in reality, this was her mother's way of being protective and showing love.

This loss of identity reflects heavily in June's character throughout her journey. Before her death, her mother lastly told the story of her immigration struggle to June as one of impacting facts and loss. She told June that she was carrying two babies and silk dresses and that " By the time I arrived in Chungking I had lost everything" (Tan 26). June remembers the first time her mother told her that she was not " those babies" and that her father was not Suyuan's first husband. This recent memory puts June at a loss of words, rendering her speechless and leaving the rest of the Joy Luck Club to fill her head with their recollections of her mother.

Wondering how she will ever fill her mother's shoes at the Joy Luck Club, June floods her nervousness with memories of her mother. This sort of transition from memory to reality is an acting bridge for the narrator to switch from June to Suyuan. When the other members of the Joy Luck Club

(who June refers to as “aunties”) recommend that she seek out her two, long lost, half sisters, June is terrified. First, June feels obligated because they (the aunties) give her money to travel back to China, and second, even though June has lost her mother, she still feels like she may fail her. Her auntie Ying says “You must see your sisters and tell them about your mother’s death...most important, you must tell them about her life” (Tan 40).

“The aunties” are living vicariously through June in this instance. They see a reflection of their own children in that they worry that they do not have the relationship they desire with them because their children are Chinese-American, and do not have any raw experiences from the same struggles of being pushed out of China that they had. The aunties are afraid that they are losing their connected roots to China because their children take their heritage for granted, like June has with her mother (“The Joy Luck Club”).

In the chapter “Two Kinds” June narrates her memories of her mother’s severe criticisms for her and everything that she does. Despite June’s attempts to please her mother by playing the piano during a recital gone wrong, June describes her mother’s disappointment by saying “But my mother’s expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything” (Tan 140).

June’s emotional reliance on her mother’s approval was so sensitive, that in this moment, she referred to her mother’s face as an expression of “losing everything...” This is such an intensely sore feeling for June, that she comparatively implies her mother’s expression of “losing everything” as referencing when her mother lost everything in Chungking. Although June

was always trying to meet her mother's high expectations, her mother's disappointed responses took an extreme role in June's downfall. June lost her confidence and her pride under her mother's shaming shadow and was never able to recover from the harsh reality that until her mother died, June would have no self-satisfaction in thinking she was good enough. Through her mother's harsh verbal critiques and abusive actions, June felt lost, like a loser, and lost pieces of herself along the way. These pieces would eventually be redeemed when June actualizes her identity by researching her family history on her adventure back to China to find her sisters.

In "A Pair of Tickets", Jing-Mei uses her memories of her mother as type of guide of strength and encouragement. She so strongly still feels her mother's disdain for her every move that it actually gives her a familiar comfort and motivation to continue through China in search of her sisters. Jing-Mei's mother's voice echoes through her bones, forcibly making her embrace her Chinese heritage (hence the reference "Jing-Mei", now, instead of "June"). She can hear her mother saying "Someday you will see...It is in your blood, waiting to be let go" (Tan 267).

In a sense, Jing-Mei found herself the second she stepped into China. She has an immediate sense of belonging and comfort ability that helps her realize she is her mother after all. She imagines the joy that her mother would have, experiencing her journey back to Kweilin and seeing her daughters again. Jing-Mei is traveling with her father, who she states for the first time that she can ever remember, "...is in tears" (Tan 268).

Ironically the initial experience is not what Jing-Mei expects to be a traditional Chinese one. All her life “ June” had not craved Chinese tradition, and denied her true Chinese heritage, exclaiming that she did not want to be like her mother. Now, in China, in a fancy hotel, meeting with her Chinese family, she is self conscious of looking “ too rich” and “ too American”. When they order room service she craves traditional Chinese food, and they end up getting hamburgers and French fries from room service. This reverse role perspective is an important moment for Jing-Mei. She realizes just how Chinese she really desires to be, and instead of dreading her cultural history, wants instinctively to be a part of it, like her mother was (Tan 278).

In an emotional ending, Jing-Mei is anxious to meet her sisters. After spending some time with her great aunt and watching her father reunite with her, Jing-Mei is determined to hear her father’s side of the story that sparked the Joy Luck Club. Her father explains that Suyuan never gave up on finding her twin daughters. He explains about all the compassion his now deceased wife had and the strength and hope she carried the day that she lost her babies that they would be reunited again. He describes a heart wrenching and detailed quest that highlights Suyuan to Jing-Mei in a very different way (Tan 286).

On the day that Jing-Mei arrives to Shanghai to meet her sisters, emotions are unbridled with warm embraces. Jing-Mei describes seeing her mother’s image in her sisters, and recognizing that in an instance, she has finally lost her need to please her mother. She finds her sisters oddly familiar even though she’s never met them before. Jing-Mei feels that she is completing her mother’s wishes. Jing-Mei realizes that through her mother’s story of <https://assignbuster.com/different-types-of-losses-in-the-joy-luck-club-novel/>

turmoil, struggle, sacrifice, and love that she has indeed found herself- a Chinese woman and proud to be, no longer lost in her mother's image, but a reflection of her pride and identity.