

**Literary Models for Autobiographical Writing, Part II: A Sample Application--Amy Tan's
"A Pair of Tickets"**

by Gina Macdonald, engl-vlm@nicholls.edu,
and Michele Theriot, engl-mdt@mail.nicholls.edu,
Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana

Editor's Note: See HEIS E-Section from February 2003 for Part I of this article, which highlights the benefits of using literary models and outlines several potential topics for use in multilingual classrooms.

In order to demonstrate how literature might serve as models for autobiographical writing in the ESL classroom, we offer the model of Amy Tan's "A Pair of Tickets" and a series of writing tasks that will guide the student to two interesting final papers. At the same time, this series of writing tasks is designed to help students acquire a deeper understanding of the author's method of composition and to provide them an opportunity to think about personal change while putting into practice what they have learned about effective writing from the literary model. The first assignment should focus on the literary work and understanding the author's argument and method; the second assignment should be an imitation of the author's pattern to explore the student's personal voyage of self-discovery.

The First Writing Assignment: Close Study of the Text

The first writing assignment could call for the student to trace character development through an examination of setting, using Tan's short story taken from *The Joy Luck Club* as a model. In Tan's story the narrator, June May Woo, leaves her comfortable native surroundings, San Francisco, to

meet her half sisters in her parents' homeland, China. On this journey to China, June May learns a lot about herself as she travels through various settings both exotic and familiar.

Since "A Pair of Tickets" is a story of self-discovery in which June May goes on a figurative journey to self-discovery when she takes a literal journey to China, the birthplace of her parents, ESL students naturally find parallels with their own personal stories. In finding China, June May believes she has found a part of herself that she had vigorously denied heretofore. The changes in location play a major role in enabling her to examine her sense of personal identity and the heritage her parents have claimed is hers; in turn, by closely examining June May in different settings, the ESL reader can come to a better understanding of her character and of the author's clever device of tying psychological change to place.

Brainstorming in Class

To prepare the class for the writing assignment, the instructor may break the class up into several small groups, ideally four groups containing four to five students each. Each group should take a different setting: San Francisco, the train and train station, the hotel, and the airport in Shanghai (if there are more than four groups, then two or more groups will discuss the same setting). Each group will then apply the same questions to the location focus:

- (1) How does June May see herself in this setting?
- (2) How does she define her identity?
- (3) How does she feel about being labeled "Chinese" while she is in this setting?

When discussion begins to lag, as it often does in collaborative work, each group should share its tentative responses with the rest of the class. This approach encourages students to deal with each

other conversationally as they progress toward a desired end, to not only share but also to defend their observations and interpretations, and to reach a group consensus that can then be presented to the class at large. These questions should initiate some excited discussion within each group as students disagree about June May's character and inevitably find parallels with personal experiences. When the discussion is then opened up to the whole class, the contrasts in answers as the location changes should raise interesting questions that will take the class in useful directions.

Writing in Stages

In general, the writing assignment requires students to explore how setting helps June May Woo come to an understanding of her identity, how her attitude toward her Chinese heritage changes during her journey into China, and, more specifically, how June May's attitude toward the Chinese part of her identity changes with her surroundings: San Francisco, the train and train station, the hotel, and finally, the airport in Shanghai.

At this point in the assignment, group brainstorming is replaced by individual writing. Because international students often have trouble constructing lengthy essays unified with a complex argument, left to their own devices they may well flounder about and struggle to produce a summary paragraph. However, if teachers design their assignments to make students concentrate on one stage of the argument at a time, producing and revising one body paragraph after another until the set of four on the four locations is complete, they can accomplish a number of goals. They can not only teach students to observe argument and structure closely and guide them through an informed reading of the story, but they can also teach them the process whereby short writing exercises--four distinct body paragraphs done one at a time-- can add up to a college-length essay. The final focus of this last effort should be on providing unity by adding an

introduction with a thesis and by making the fourth paragraph a clear summary conclusion about changes in the personal sense of self being tied to location.

Body Paragraphs

Following this plan, the first body paragraph would examine June May's native setting, San Francisco, and its effects on her self-image and attitude toward her Chinese heritage. Before she begins her journey to China, she has a very definite opinion of who she is and who she is not, mainly because she has always lived in this American setting and has always known the American culture and nothing else. Essentially, this body paragraph provides students an opportunity to explain how June May's being in America, specifically San Francisco, her birthplace, shapes her identity and attitude toward her cultural heritage. The assignment might be written as follows:

Body paragraph 1: Examine June May's native setting, San Francisco, and how it shapes her self-image and attitudes. She has a very definite opinion of who she is and who she is not. Explain how she sees herself and who she thinks she is in America. How does being born and raised in America shape her sense of self? Does she have a strong sense of who she is and where she is from? Does she have a strong sense of who she is not? How would she define her identity, her culture? Which clues indicate this to you? How does she feel about being labeled "Chinese?" How do you know? What does she associate with being Chinese? Are these associations negative or positive? Is she interested in learning about her mother and father's heritage or ancestry at this point? Why or why not? What lines from the story summarize her attitude best? How or why does being in San Francisco influence the way she feels and the identity to which she relates?

The guidelines to paragraph development lie in encouraging the students to answer each question in order. The biggest challenge in answering some of these questions lies in locating the material that provides the answers. The story begins in China and flashes back to scenes in San Francisco, and some of these scenes go back approximately eleven years to June May's teenaged struggles. Students may have to reread the entire story to locate the San Francisco parts that are scattered throughout the entire work.

After analyzing San Francisco's importance in shaping June May's identity, students should move to the first Chinese setting, the train and the train station. The thesis of the second body paragraph should be similar to that of the first: June May's self-image and her attitude toward the Chinese part of her identity in this setting. The main idea for the student to consider is how the change in setting affects a change in the protagonist's self-image and attitude. Again, to help students examine the topic fully and develop the ideas effectively, teachers should provide assignment questions to guide students toward a well-developed paragraph:

Body paragraph 2: Focus on the train and the train station and how this location relates to June May's attitudes about her identity. Does any change occur in her self-image and in her attitude towards being partially Chinese? Is she as certain about her identity now as she was in San Francisco? Give examples of her being caught between two cultures and feeling a split in her identity. How does she feel about her Chinese relatives when she first sees them? Is she initially interested in knowing them, or does she seem to be an outsider looking in on this reunion and experience? Do any lines in the story suggest the beginning of a change in her attitude before she leaves the train station?

Next, body paragraph 3 should focus on the hotel and its effect on June May's self-image and attitude toward the Chinese part of her heritage. The narrator has moved to a new setting; how

does this new location bring about a change in her understanding of herself and her heritage? Is she continuing to progress on this journey to self-discovery? The assignment guidelines for this paragraph might be as follows:

Body paragraph 3: Focus on the hotel and its effects on June May's self-image and attitude.

Reread the scene detailing their arrival at the hotel--is there anything significant about her concerned with the price of the room? How does the narrator's attitude and self-image change somewhat in the hotel? What does she say about her shower that suggests a change? Does she show more or less interest in Chinese culture while there? Does being surrounded by her Chinese family affect her? What does she become curious about and interested in? Her father's tapping on the glass awakens her; does this have a deeper level of meaning? What does her insistence upon hearing the story of her half-sisters' lives indicate? Is there any evidence that she has begun to see herself as partially Chinese?

Some students will probably point out that the hotel, while located in China, is not genuinely Chinese; rather, it is Americanized or at least globalized. This observation opens up a good topic of discussion. Does it matter that the hotel is more Western than Chinese? Can June May really discover Chinese roots in this type of hotel? Or, does the hotel eventually become authentically Chinese because her room and her father's room are filled with "real" Chinese culture, their relatives?

The final paragraph should examine the ultimate destination in the Woos' journey, Shanghai. After recounting the fact that through the various settings, San Francisco, the train and train station, and the hotel, June May has gradually grown from rejecting to becoming more curious about her Chinese heritage, students will turn their attention to the airport in Shanghai. Again, the paragraph will explore how this setting affects June May's self-image and attitude toward the

Chinese part of her heritage. To develop ideas for the concluding paragraph, students may consider the following assignment questions:

4th paragraph (possibly conclusion): In one or two sentences, summarize what you have explored so far in this essay. Then turn to the final location, the airport. What is our final image of June May? How has she changed in her progress from San Francisco to Shanghai? How does she feel about meeting her half-sisters? What lines indicate her attitude toward her cultural heritage and the Chinese part of herself has become positive? What suggests she now accepts her Chinese heritage as important to her personal identity? Do you note any other changes in her?

Students will probably have the easiest time developing this paragraph because the scene is shorter than the others. Overall, though, at this point, they should truly be able to see how June May Woo has gradually changed into Jing-mei Woo with each change of scenery. Mapping out the details of her literal journey allows students to see the larger implications. Taking the journey with her, they discover the changes in her self-image as she does.

The Full Paper

Upon completing this final paragraph, students are then ready to make the leap to a full paper. By adding an introduction with a thesis statement and connecting words between paragraphs, they should have a fairly lengthy creation. The overall paper assignment might look like this:

Overall assignment: In Amy Tan's "A Pair of Tickets" June May Woo, the narrator and main character, goes on a figurative journey of self-discovery when she takes a literal journey to her parent's homeland, China. In visiting China, she finds a part of herself. The changes in location play a major role in helping her see herself in a new way and discover a new, more complex

identity. Examine how June May's attitude toward her Chinese heritage changes as her surroundings change from San Francisco to the train and train station, then the hotel, and finally the airport in Shanghai.

Saving a statement of the full assignment until after students have completed individual sections should prevent complaints about inability to tackle so challenging a writing project and should also provide the surprise of recognition--recognition of how the parts already completed could indeed add up to a unified and fairly complex argument. Discussion can then center on the process necessary to make their separate paragraphs fit together to meet the demands of this assignment.

Inevitably, of course, students who have experienced similar travels themselves might cynically observe the superficiality of June May's contact with Chinese culture, her lack of language skills, her possible misinterpretation of her older sisters' emphasis on "younger sister" (a significant power distinction in Chinese families), and, more significantly, her round-trip ticket home to safe, secure America. Students should feel free to question the narrator's self-perceptions in the light of their own multicultural awareness.

The Second Writing Assignment: Creative Imitation

Once students can see the structure of Amy Tan's story clearly, they are ready to imitate it, that is, to use it as a model for their own creation. This creative imitation is a more challenging and sophisticated approach to autobiography than the usual ESL assignment: tell us about your life. It provides a focus and direction and the potential for self-examination and self-discovery as it evolves:

ASSIGNMENT: Describe a journey that you went on, a trip that you took, that led to a discovery of something about yourself, that changed your self-image, that made you rethink your past assumptions. Organize your personal essay around location to help readers see how changing from one place to another and the journey between those two places somehow changed you, your attitudes, your values, your sense of self, your understanding of something, and so on.

Since the one given for international students is that they have all made a journey, this assignment automatically fits their life experiences. They can discuss coming to the U.S.A. and then going home and discovering how much their American experience changed their image of themselves, or, if the reverse is true, they can describe how their journey helped confirm and test their values and therefore taught them to better appreciate home. Either way, the Tan model provides a pattern for exploring the stages of the literal journey and tying those stages to the psychological, emotional, social, or intellectual stages in their progress from one sense of self to another.

In sum, we advocate a concrete merging of discussions of immigrant literature with ESL composition as a strategy for guiding students toward college-level creations: the character analysis and the personal essay. The resultant personal essay will indeed be based on biographical experiences, but enhanced by attention to structure and to literary method. The trepidation our ESL students have felt initially at tackling a short story with an unfamiliar structure and challenging vocabulary turned to jubilation not only at their success in reading with understanding but also at their success in exploring personal applications that made the experience even more valuable as a bridge between writing styles and between cultures.