Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

The Joy Luck Club

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Plot and structure

- San Francisco, from the 1940s to the 1980s. Four Chinese **immigrant** mothers meet to play **mah-jong** in the Joy Luck Club: Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong and Ying-ying St. Clair. Their American-born daughters are Jing-mei (June) Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong and Lena St. Clair.
- The novel is made of 16 linked stories in four sections. Each section opens with a short **fable**. The mothers tell of their lives in China; the daughters tell of growing up in America and their troubled adult lives.
- Suyuan, who started the club in wartime China, has just died when the novel opens, and June takes her place at the table. Suyuan had been forced to leave twin baby daughters behind as she fled the Japanese invasion.
- At the end, June travels to China to meet the half-sisters her mother never stopped looking for, and finally feels she understands her mother.

The mothers and daughters

- Lindo and Waverly: Lindo escaped an arranged marriage by her own cleverness. Waverly becomes a child chess champion using the "invisible strength" her mother taught her, but they clash over pride and control.
- An-mei and Rose: An-mei learned from her mother's tragic life to speak up. Rose struggles to make decisions, and her marriage to Ted breaks down until she stands up for herself.
- Ying-ying and Lena: Ying-ying lost her sense of self after a bad first marriage. Lena is in an unequal marriage with Harold, where they split every bill, and her mother sees the cracks before she does.
- Suyuan and June: June feels she never lived up to her mother's hopes, shown in her disastrous piano recital, but learns of her mother's love and suffering.

Themes and context

- Mother and daughter relationships, identity between two cultures, communication and the gaps of language, sacrifice, hope and the power of telling stories.
- The mothers want their daughters to have the chances they never had, but also to keep their Chinese values; the daughters want to be fully American, and often misunderstand them.
- Amy Tan, the daughter of Chinese **immigrants**, published the novel in 1989. Many Chinese people fled to America after the Japanese invasion of China and the civil war of the 1930s and 40s.

Key terms

Immigrant	A person who has moved to live permanently in another country.
Mah-jong	A Chinese game played with tiles by four players.
Fable	A short story that teaches a lesson.
Generation gap	Differences in values and understanding between parents and children.
Dual identity	Belonging to two cultures at once, such as Chinese and American.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is most of The Joy Luck Club set?
2. What game do the mothers play in the Joy Luck Club?
3. Which mother has died when the novel begins?
4. Who takes Suyuan's place at the table?
5. Which daughter becomes a child chess champion?
6. How many stories make up the novel?
7. What does each section begin with?
8. Whom does June meet in China at the end?

Answers

1. San Francisco
2. Mah-jong
3. Suyuan Woo
4. Her daughter, June
5. Waverly Jong
6. 16
7. A short fable
8. Her half-sisters, Suyuan's twin daughters

Your notes

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

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