

The Asian American experience

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How much do your students know about Asian Americans? The following is a twelve-week syllabus for teaching the novels *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jane Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. In addition, the films *Come See the Paradise* and *The Joy Luck Club* are taught in conjunction with reading the novels. The purpose of this syllabus is to foster cross-cultural awareness and improve students' reading comprehension, writing and discussion skills. A detailed explanation of comprehension questions and journal assignments will be given in addition to the testing and evaluation of students.

いったいどれくらいの学生がアジア系アメリカ人について知っているだろうか。以下に取り上げるのは、Wakatsuki Houstonと James D. Houstonの*Farewell to Manzanar* Janeと、Amy Tan の*The Joy Luck Club*の両小説を教える授業の12週のシラバスである。また、映画 *Come See the Paradise*と*The Joy Luck Club* も小説と共に授業で扱う。学生には、テストと評価に加え、読解問題の細説明と日記課題が与えられる。

Most Japanese university students know very little about Asian Americans. This paper will explain a twelve-week syllabus used in a freshmen-reading class for teaching the novels *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jane Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. *Farewell to Manzanar* is a true story of the Japanese American experience during and after their World War II internment. *The Joy Luck Club* follows the lives of four Chinese women in pre-1949 China and the lives of their American-born daughters in California, focusing on the different mother-daughter relationships.

In addition to reading these novels, the students watch two films. First, *Come See the Paradise* by Alan Parker explores the lives of the Kawamura family living in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles just prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and their subsequent internment at Manzanar. The parents are both *Issei* while their children are *Nisei* and American citizens. Since this film is based loosely on *Farewell to Manzanar*, it supplements the book nicely. The students also watch *The Joy Luck Club* by Wayne Wang, which faithfully follows the novel of the same title.

The purpose of this syllabus is to foster cross-cultural awareness as well as improve students' reading comprehension, writing and discussion skills. The syllabus contains reading comprehension questions followed by sample answers generated by the instructor. These answers serve as a model for students and provide the instructor with a means of evaluating student answers. However, it should be noted that student answers might vary in form and content and differ from the samples given below. This does not mean that answers that do not conform to the sample answer are incorrect.

Unit One

For the first five weeks of the semester, the students read *Farewell to Manzanar* and watch *Come See the Paradise*, followed by a midterm exam during the sixth week. In the first week, the students read chapters 1-5 of the book and watch scenes 1-12 of the movie. They are given worksheets each week where they are required to answer comprehension questions based on the novel. For example, "In Chapter 1, why does the author describe her father as 'a man without a country.'" A sample answer follows:

Because Papa was born in Japan, he was Japanese. Moreover, even though he had lived in America for 35 years, "he was still prevented by law from becoming an American citizen." Now that Japan was at war with America, "He was suddenly a man with no rights who looked exactly like the enemy" (p. 8).

After watching scenes 1-12 of the movie, the students are

given a journal writing assignment. For example: "In Scene 4, Papa introduces his son Harry: 'This is Harry. He's an actor in American movies...but all he plays is Chinese houseboys, can you imagine? We've come all this way to be Chinamen?' Why does Papa Kawamura have a negative image of Chinese people? Do Japanese still feel prejudice against Chinese today? What about Koreans or other Southeast Asian people?"

In the second week, the students read chapters 6-9 and watch scenes 13-26, again answering several comprehension questions. For example: "In Chapter 7, what does Papa mean when he asks the interviewer: 'When your mother and father are having a fight, do you want them to kill each other or do you want them to just stop fighting?'" The answer:

Because Papa is Japanese and because he still loves Japan, and because he lives in America and still believes in the American dream, he is "sad for both countries" (p. 62). Therefore, he wants Japan and the U.S. to stop fighting each other in the war.

After watching scenes 13-26, the students write Journal #2: "In Scene 25, Jack tells Papa Kawamura: 'What I can never be, not ever, is Japanese.' What does it mean to 'be Japanese'? What makes you Japanese?"

In the third week, the students read chapters 10-13 and watch scenes 27-53. One of the comprehension questions asks: "In Chapter 11, why did the Loyalty Oath cause so much controversy in the camp?" The answer:

Because if they answered, "Yes," they would have to fight for a country that had taken away their

freedom and rights. If they answered “No,” they would be sent to a special camp and eventually to Japan.

After watching scenes 27-53, the students write Journal #3: “In Scene 39, Jack learns that Japan has bombed Pearl Harbor, starting the Pacific War between Japan and the U.S. What is your opinion about Japan’s actions prior to and during World War II?

In the fourth week, the students read chapters 14-19 and watch scenes 54-78. A comprehension question asks: “In Chapter 16, why didn’t the author’s family react in joy to the closure of the camps?” The answer:

Because they “had no home to return to” and “they were worried about how they would be treated because they were Japanese. In addition, “our years of isolation at Manzanar had widened the already spacious gap between the races....” They felt safer in the camp because “at least we knew where we stood with our neighbors” (pp. 127-128).

After watching scenes 54-78, the students write Journal #4: “In Scene 74, the truck driver tells Jack: “Real good people, some of them Japs. Real hard workers. Trouble is, you don’t know which ones to trust, which ones will shoot you in the back. Hard problem. Beats me.” What would you say to the truck driver?

In the fifth week, the students finish the book by reading chapters 20-22 and finish watching the movie, scenes 79-105. Another comprehension question asks: “In Chapter 20, how does the author relate her shame of being Oriental to being sent to the internment camp?” The answer:

Because they were different from White Americans: “You cannot deport 110,000 people unless you stopped seeing individuals...Of course, for such a thing to happen, there has to be some kind of acquiescence on the part of the victims, some submerged belief that this treatment is deserved, or at least allowable” (pp. 158-159).

After watching scenes 79-105, the students write Journal #5: “In Scene 87, the Kawamura’s must make an important decision. If you were in Harry and Charlie’s situation, would you answer “yes” (Join the Army and possibly fight against Japan) or “no” (stay in the camp) to questions 27 and 28 on the loyalty questionnaire? Why?

In the sixth week, the students take a midterm exam based on the novel, *Farewell to Manzanar*, and the movie, *Come See the Paradise*. The first part of the exam consists of 25 true or false questions based on the novel and is worth 25 points. For example: “After leaving the camp, Papa was not allowed to have a commercial fishing license” (True), and “Because Papa had lived in America for 35 years, he was able to obtain U.S. citizenship” (False). The second part of the exam consists of 15 true or false questions based on the movie and is worth 15 points. For example: “Lily couldn’t marry Jack in California because it was against the law” (True), and “After leaving the camp, the Kawamura family moved back to Little Tokyo and reopened Papa’s movie theater” (False). Finally, the students write an essay worth 10 points on the following topic: “Compare and contrast the novel, *Farewell to Manzanar*, with the movie, *Come See the Paradise*. How are they the same? How are they different? Use examples to support your answer.”

Unit Two

During the last six weeks of the semester, the students read Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, and watch the movie with the same title directed by Wayne Wang.

In week seven, the students read pages 3 to 63 of the novel and answer comprehension questions. For example: "On page 3, what does the author mean: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch." The answer:

In China, a woman's worth was determined by whom she married. But in America, women are much more independent and have more self-worth.

After watching scenes 1-16 of the movie, the students write Journal #6: "In Scene 5, Suyuan abandons her babies in China. June claims, 'There were so many things about my mother I never understood. This is the only one I never forgave.' Do you think June should forgive her mother for abandoning the babies in China? Why?"

In week eight, the students read pages 64-121 of the novel and answer comprehension questions. For example: "What passage on page 92 reflects Lindo's attitude towards America? What is she trying to tell Waverly?" The answer:

"Chinese people do many things...do business, do medicine, do painting. Not like lazy American people. We do torture. Best torture." Lindo is trying to tell Waverly that Chinese work much harder than Americans do.

After watching scenes 17-35 of the movie, the students write Journal #7: "In Scene 24, Waverly brings her boyfriend, Rich, to her parents' house for dinner and he makes a lot of social mistakes. If you invited a foreign man to your house to have dinner with your parents, what kind of things might he do that would be considered bad manners in Japan?"

In week nine, the students read pages 122-181 of the novel and answer comprehension questions. For example: "On page 141, how do we know that June's mother believes in the 'American Dream'?" The answer:

Because her mother believed, "you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government...buy a house...become rich. You could become famous."

After watching scenes 36-48 of the movie, the students write Journal #8: "In Scene 41, Ying Ying tries to convince her daughter Lena to confront Harold with her true feelings: 'Then tell him now. And leave this lopsided house. Do not come back until he gives you those things. With both hands open.' What does Ying Ying mean when she tells Lena: 'Losing him doesn't matter. It is you who will be found... and cherished.'"

In week ten, the students read pages 182-239 of the novel and answer comprehension questions. For example: "On page 214, what does Rose realize about being more American than she is Chinese?" The answer:

Rose realizes that compared to Chinese opinions, "the American version was much better." However, she also realizes that "there was a serious flaw

with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing.”

After watching scenes 49-64 of the movie, the students write Journal #9: “In Scene 52, Ted’s mother tries to explain to Rose why she shouldn’t see Ted because Rose is Asian (Ted’s mother assumes she is Vietnamese). If you were in Rose’s situation, what would you say to Ted’s mother? Have you ever been mistaken for a person who is not Japanese? Have you ever experienced racism or discrimination because you are Oriental?”

In week eleven, the student finishes reading the novel, pages 240-332, and answer comprehension questions. For example: “Summarize the differences between America/ Americans and China/Chinese on page 289.” The answer:

People in America follow the American dream: You can start out poor and become rich. Americans do not need to be patient nor endure any hardships. In short: “In America, nobody says you have to keep circumstances somebody else gives you.” But Chinese people must listen to and obey their parents, hide their true feelings, not pursue “easy things,” and to know their “own worth.”

After watching the final scenes of the movie, 65-80, the students write Journal #10: “In Scene 69, An-Mei tells her daughter: ‘I tell you the story because I was raised the Chinese way. I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery, and to eat my own bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, but she still came out the same way. Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl...All of us like stairs, one

step after another, going up, going down, but always going the same way.’ Are you happy that you were born a girl in Japan? Why?”

In the twelfth week, the students take a final exam based on the novel and movie, *The Joy Luck Club*. In the first part of the exam, the students answer 15 true or false questions worth 15 points based on both the novel and the movie. For example: “Rose’s parents were able to move to America from China and succeed because of their belief in *nengkan*, the ability to do anything they put their mind to” (True), and “Rose discovers that people in China have too many choices, so it is easy for Chinese people to get confused and pick the wrong thing” (False). In addition, the students write an essay in which they compare and contrast the novel and the film.

Conclusion

Although this class is very demanding, the students were able to complete all of the reading assignments and answer the comprehension questions. In particular, they really enjoyed watching the movies in conjunction with the novels and writing the journal assignments. In fact, they even found that the movie helped them understand the novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. More importantly, they learned an important, and largely unknown in Japan, part of Asian American history: the relocation camps during World War II. And because these students are English major freshmen, they leave better prepared to meet the demands of their future classes. Those instructors who are interested in the complete lessons and/or tests described above should contact the author via email.

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