

## **A Look At *Two Kinds***

Nobody knows the secret ingredient which causes a prodigy's accelerated prowess. However, Jing-Mei's mother would give anything for her daughter in exchange for her daughter to possess this trait, so she devises a series of schemes to train Jing-Mei as a prodigy. "Two Kinds" by Amy Tan reveals Jing-Mei's struggle to accept or deny her mother's wishes. Moreover, this story investigates the strained relationship between a mother with unrealistic expectations and her daughter by using setting, descriptive irony, characterization, and meaningful symbolism.

The first device this story uses to sketch the situation between Jing-Mei and her mother is setting. All pertinent information concerning the story is explained on the first page which leaves more room for the story to ensue. The first page tells us, "America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949" (95). This statement exposes where the story is taking place, i.e., America. The first page goes on to say, "At first my mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple" (95). This is a clue to the time period in which the story takes place. Because Shirley Temple was widely popular in the 1930's, we may assume that the story takes place during this time. All of the relevant information about the setting of "Two Kinds" is listed on the very first page which opens the story up for more important details about Jing-Mei and her mother.

Another element used to depict the drama of Jing-Mei's troubled relationship with her mother is irony. "Two Kinds" bleeds irony. An example of this irony is the verbal irony after Jing-Mei's terrible piano recital when her father exclaims, "'That was somethin' else,' said my father, and I wondered if he was referring to me in a humorous way, or whether he even remembered what I had done" (101). Her father's comment seems positive despite Jing-Mei's

poor performance. Situational irony also follows when Jing-Mei is offered the family piano. The text reads, “A few years ago, she offered to give me the piano, for my thirtieth birthday. I had not played in all those years” (103). It’s ironic that she is offered the piano when she hasn’t played for a long time and may no longer be able to. Amy Tan uses irony to make Jing-Mei’s crisis more intriguing.

In addition to this, characterization makes the story more believable by adding depth to Jing-Mei and her problems. One may argue that there aren’t very many characters in “Two Kinds,” but these characters are described vividly. One way Tan achieves this is by describing Jing-Mei indirectly through her thoughts and words. We read, “I assumed my talent-show fiasco meant I never had to play the piano again” (101). This shows us Jing-Mei has forfeited her ambitions; after this thought she ceases to try to meet her mother’s expectations. Jing-Mei is further depicted by what she says. The text states, “‘I’m not going to play anymore,’ I said nonchalantly” (102). Now that Jing-Mei has given up, she has resolved to quit piano even when her mother pressures her to continue playing. These things tell us more about her independent nature and add gravity to her conflict.

Furthermore, a “Two Kinds” employs symbolism to indicate meaning in Jing-Mei’s chronicle. One example of symbolism in this story is the piano itself. According to the story, “A few years ago, she offered to give me the piano, for my thirtieth birthday. I had not played in all those years. I saw the offer as a sign of forgiveness, a tremendous burden removed” (103). Jing-Mei has been pressured to be extraordinary until she finally gives up after failing at piano. Her mother offers her the piano because she respects Jing-Mei for who she is; while Jing-Mei isn’t very good at playing the piano, she can play it. Further examples of symbolism are the titles of pieces Jing-Mei plays on the piano. Part of the last paragraph reads, “*Pleading Child* was shorter

but slower; *Perfectly Contented* was longer but faster. And after I played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song” (103). The symbolism here is clear: while Jing-Mei struggled with her mother’s expectations at first, she eventually comes to be at peace with her mom and herself by finally letting go. Symbolism is sprinkled throughout “Two Kinds” and exposes Jing-Mei’s feelings.

Conclusively, “Two Kinds” including a definite setting, colorful irony, deep characterization, and important symbols. The setting is quickly and effectively established. The irony in this story gives it intriguing personality. Each character in this story, especially Jing-Mei, is drawn with a genuine tone. And one can easily find meaningful symbolism within its pages. All of these elements combine to show the readers that, like Jing-Mei, you don’t have to be a prodigy to be respected or loved; just be yourself.

Works Cited

Tan, Amy. "Two Kinds." *Elements of Literature: Fourth Course*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2000.