

“Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan

Questions

Meaning:

1. For Tan the phrase “mother tongue” has a special meaning. How would you summarize this meaning? Why does Tan feel so deeply about her “mother tongue”?
2. In what ways does the English that Tan’s mother speaks affect how people outside the Chinese American community think of her? What examples does Tan give to demonstrate this fact of her mother’s life?
3. In paragraph 15, Tan writes, “[M]y mother’s English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well.” What does she mean? Why does she use the qualifier “almost”?

Purpose & Audience:

4. Why do you suppose Tan wrote this essay? Does she have a purpose beyond changing readers’ perceptions of her mother’s “broken’ English? What passages support your answer?
5. How can you tell that Tan is not writing primarily to an audience of Asian Americans? If Asian Americans were her primary audience, how might the essay be different?

Method & Structure:

6. How does Tan develop her definition of her “mother tongue”? That is, how does she best help readers understand her mother’s speech?
7. Tan divides her essay into three sections , the second beginning in paragraph 8 and the third beginning in paragraph 18. What is the focus of each section? Why do you think Tan divided the essay like this?
8. **Other Methods**--In paragraph 2 and again in paragraph 21, Tan refers to “all the Englishes I grew up with.” How does she classify these various “Englishes”?

Language:

9. What troubles Tan about the labels “broken,” “fractured,” and “limited” for her mother’s English (paragraph 8)? How do these labels contrast with the way she views her mother’s speech?
10. In paragraphs 16 and 17, Tan writes about the kinds of vocabulary items that appear on standardized English test. In contrast to the precision of the answers to mathematical questions, why were the answer to vocabulary questions “always a judgement call, a matter of opinion and personal experience” for her?