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# *The Woman Warrior*

by

**Maxine Hong Kingston**

**1976**



MonkeyNotes by PinkMonkey Staff

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The book is set in the present time in Oakland, California, but the characters also visit San Francisco, California, and, in memory, they visit the past in a small village in Canton, China.

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Maxine Kingston** - the Chinese-American protagonist of the book. She is seen in the memoirs at different ages, from a young girl to a mature woman.

**Brave Orchid** - Maxine's mother, who is a very strong-willed Chinese-American woman. In China, she was a medical doctor, and in the United States, she owns a laundry with her husband and in her older years, works in the tomato fields as an itinerant farm worker.

#### Minor Characters

**The Woman Warrior** - a figure from folklore, who proves her filial piety by saving her family and her village in China.

**Moon Orchid** - Brave Orchid's sister, who comes as an elderly woman, from Hong Kong to the United States in order to join her husband, who had abandoned her years ago.

**No Name Woman** - Maxine's father's sister, who became pregnant in China by an unknown man who was not her husband and who committed suicide and infanticide after bearing her child.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Maxine, a second generation Chinese-American, struggles with her .....

**Antagonist** - Brave Orchid is the antagonist for much of the.....

**Climax** - Maxine confronts her mother, Brave Orchid, and accuses her of all the difficulties of.....

**Outcome** - The memoirs end in comedy, for Maxine reconciles with her mother and her.....

### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The plot of these memoirs is very difficult to simplify because each section acts as a separate story, and the links between them are oblique and subtle. Each section has its own plot. The first section, "No Name Woman," tells the story of Kingston's aunt on her father's side, who becomes pregnant by a man who is not her husband. The villagers in China are horrified at her behavior and raid her family's home and farm. She gives birth to her child alone and then commits suicide and infanticide. Kingston retells this story as a means to vindicate her aunt from the censure of the villagers and to provide cultural and historical context for her actions so that she can be understood and sympathized with.

The second section, "White Tigers," tells the story of the woman warrior, a folk hero about whom Kingston has heard since childhood. The woman warrior was provided as an alternative role for Kingston from the other two roles allotted to women -- that of wife or slave. The woman warrior is trained by two caring old people from the time she is a girl of seven through the age of twenty-two. She learns fighting and running skills from all the animals. When she finishes her training, she returns to her village and takes her father's place in battle. She

becomes a famous and beloved leader of an army, meets her husband to whom her parents married her by proxy while she was away, and has a son. She participates in a peasant rebellion, which overthrows the emperor, returns home and decapitates the greedy baron of her village, and settles into a life of honor with her family. Kingston tells the story of the woman warrior as a contrast to her own American life, where she has no political voice in fighting racism and oppression.

The third section, "Shaman," describes Kingston's mother's life as a doctor in China. Brave Orchid is married to a man who migrates to the United States and cannot send for her for years. She lives with her tyrannical mother-in-law until she goes to medical school and studies to be a doctor. While at school, she fights a Sitting Ghost and impresses all her fellow students with her bravery. Then she.....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme of the memoirs is that Chinese women can rise above the inferior position dictated by their heritage without abandoning all cultural ties. Kingston often gains Chinese knowledge from her mother who assumes that Kingston's stance in relation to eastern culture should be submissive.....

### **Minor Theme**

The minor theme of *The Woman Warrior* is that a blending of two cultures is possible and is developed in the book through Kingston's evolving relationship with her mother, Brave Orchid. Brave Orchid drives Kingston to distraction with her non-Western thinking and her overbearing treatment of.....

## **MOOD**

The mood of the memoirs is meditative and speculative. Kingston works in most of the sections in an improvisational narrative mode. She does not come across as an.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California in 1940 as Maxine Ting Hong. She was the eldest child of six children. As a young girl, she was often confused about her dual American and Chinese heritage. But attending public school in California, she became very Americanized. After graduation from high school, she attended the University of California at Berkeley and received a Bachelor's degree in 1962. In 1965, she earned her teaching certificate.

Kingston is the most popular Asian-American writer living today. Her work is.....

## **LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

To call *The Woman Warrior*, a non-fiction book, is rather misleading, for Kingston experiments with mixing many different forms in her memoirs: autobiography, fiction, history, and folk tales. It is crucial that readers recognize the mix of genres in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston reveals that she.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS**

### **CHAPTER 1: "No Name Woman"**

#### **Summary**

The narrator is a girl who has just reached puberty. Her mother tells her the story of her "No Name Aunt" as a means of warning her away from premarital sex. The story is completely secret in the family. The chapter begins, "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you." The voice is Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid. She first tells Kingston very briefly and crudely that the no name aunt was her father's sister who committed

suicide by jumping into the family well. Brave Orchid adds that the family acts as though she had never been born.

In 1924, their native village in China had just celebrated "seventeen hurry-up weddings" between men who embarked for the United States, called "The Gold Mountain," and women of the village. The marriages took place to ensure the men's eventual return to the village. Brave Orchid, living with her husband's family as was customary for Chinese wives to do, noticed that her new sister-in-law was pregnant even though it had been years since her husband had departed the village. The family remained silent about this fact, but the people of the village had noticed it, too. One night just before the due date of the baby's birth, the villagers wearing masks, raided the house of the no name woman as punishment. They destroyed the family's crop, slaughtered their livestock, broke their household goods, and ruined their supplies. During the raid, the family could only stand and stare in disbelief. The woman gave birth in the pigsty that same night and Brave Orchid found her sister-in-law and the baby the next day drowned in the family well.

Brave Orchid gives a warning to Kingston: "What happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born." Kingston follows her mother's story with a meditation. As a second-generation Chinese American, she is confused about fitting the stories of past Chinese generations to "solid America." She adds that the elder Chinese confuse the gods by using false names. Kingston thinks they also confuse their children who are always trying to get things straight and to name the unnamable. She says that the younger Chinese Americans that she knows hide their real names and struggle with trying to separate out what in them is Chinese and what in them is American. She admits that she also struggles with her identity.

Kingston returns to the story of her no name aunt and says that if she wants to know something more about her than what her mother has told her, she cannot ask her mother directly. Her mother is guided only by necessity and has already told Kingston all the necessary parts. She remembers that as children, whenever she and her siblings did anything fun or frivolous, they were accused of needlessly using up energy. In thinking about the no name aunt, Kingston says, "adultery is extravagance." She tries to figure out how her aunt could have been so extravagant as to have committed adultery. She adds that in the China of her aunt's time, the people wasted nothing, not even the gizzard lining of the chickens. Also at that time, women in China were considered to be a definite waste. Kingston then reasons that her aunt "could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex." She decides that her aunt must have been forced to have sex with some man, likely one of the villagers who raided her home. She imagines that the aunt had probably encountered this man while working in the fields. He had ordered her to have sex with him, and she had obeyed because she had been taught to always do as she was told.

Kingston goes back in time to when her aunt was married. On the first night she saw him, they became husband and wife and had sex; he then sailed for America. Kingston imagines that her aunt probably had forgotten even what he looked like. Next, Kingston remembers conversations between her mother and father in which they had referred to the outcast table where wrongdoers were forced to eat alone. She adds that, unlike the Japanese who let outcasts leave the family to become samurais and geishas, the Chinese made the outcasts remain in the family, ostracized for life. She guesses that her aunt must have eaten at the outcast table.

Kingston finds another question about the story. Even though wives always went to live with their husbands' families, the aunt was apparently living with her own family at the time of the raid. She wonders if the aunt had been sent back from her husband's family in disgrace. Then she remembers that her aunt was an only daughter in a family of four brothers, all of whom had traveled to the United States. Perhaps the family had sent for the daughter, but they certainly expected her to "keep the traditional ways." Kingston assumes that her aunt, her

"forerunner," had let her delicate dreams grow. She imagines that her aunt perhaps found a man attractive for subtle things like the way his hair grew, and disgraced the family for such a subtle attraction. Kingston momentarily entertains the idea that perhaps her aunt could have been "a wild woman" who kept "rollicking company." She then dismisses this scenario because it does not fit with the aunt's time.

Next, Kingston envisions her aunt working on her appearance in front of a mirror. She knows that a woman of her aunt's time would quickly gain a reputation as an eccentric if she tended to her looks. All the married women "blunt cut their hair" or wore tight buns. Kingston identifies with her aunt's spirit and imagines that she "combed individuality into her bob." Kingston then remembers a story about her grandfather, who was no name's father. One day he brought home a baby girl, having traded one of his sons for her. His wife had made him retrieve the son. Kingston hopes that when he had his own daughter, the no name aunt, he doted on her before her tragic end.

Kingston digresses again and thinks about the Chinese immigrants who always seem to have loud voices, "not modulated to American tones even after years away from the villages where they called their friendships out across the fields." Ironically, at the Chinese dinner table, there is quiet, for no one is allowed to talk.

Kingston then returns to the story of the aunt and definitely decides that the pregnancy is due to a rape rather than a voluntary love affair. She says the guilty man might have been someone of her own family, but even a man outside the family would have been abhorrent because "all the village were kinsmen." In a population that has only one hundred surnames, the Chinese studied birth charts to prevent incest. Because of such kinship ties, sexual advances were thought to be dangerous. Kingston says that as a girl, she used to add "brother" silently to boys' names to hex them or to make them less appealing or less scary. She adds that she had also hexed herself because she did not date while growing up. She had trouble making herself attractive to the Chinese boys in her class.

Kingston next digresses into the Chinese village structure, where "spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land." If one person acted outside the norm, the violence of that action "could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky." Returning to the aunt's story, Kingston realizes that the villagers were frightened by the aunt's violation of custom in getting pregnant. The raid was punishment for her acting like she could have a private life.

Kingston next imagines what it would have been like after the raid. The family cursed the aunt, calling her a ghost, claiming she had never been born. The aunt would have run out into the fields to lie down with the first pains of childbirth. She would remember that "old-fashioned women gave birth in their pigsties to fool the jealous, pain-dealing gods, who do not snatch piglets." She would then run to the pigsty before the next contraction. When the baby was born, she would touch it in the dark, feeling for fingers and toes. But the aunt realized that the child had no family and decided to take the baby with her to death.

Kingston returns to Brave Orchid's original warning. For twenty-five years, since she has heard this story, she has kept silent about it, never asking questions. She does not even know her aunt's name. She decides that the real punishment to the aunt was not the raid, but the family's deliberately forgetting her in a culture that worships heritage and ancestors. Kingston ends the chapter by admitting that her aunt still haunts her all these years. She knows that her aunt performed a 'spite' suicide, drowning herself and her infant in the family drinking water, knowing that the drowned ghost is a fearful figure in Chinese culture. In spite of the suicide and infanticide, Kingston gives the no name aunt the history that she deserves, and in doing so, makes a statement that all women are important and have value. She also defies her mother who has warned her to remain silent about the story.

## Notes

This first “chapter” of Kingston's memoirs is often difficult to follow, for it is highly improvisational. Since the author lacks concrete and sure knowledge of her aunt's actions or motivation, Kingston must reconstruct the scenes with imagination. She comes up with several scenarios, each one temporarily considered and a provisional possibility, to explain her aunt's life and death. The aunt might have fallen in love and become pregnant; she might have been raped; or she might have been promiscuous. Kingston also provides scenarios, which picture the aunt differently from Brave Orchid's image of her as a prodigal daughter who brought down shame upon the family. In Kingston's versions, the aunt becomes a highly imaginative woman who goes against custom, and a loving mother, and an injured member of the community.

Most importantly, Kingston keeps reminding the reader of why she is so concerned about her aunt. The aunt's story has been taught as a negative lesson on womanhood. Kingston's mother has warned her daughter repeatedly to obey all the rules or share the same destiny as the aunt. Ironically, as a Chinese-American, Kingston has been breaking the rules of traditional China all along. She identifies with the no name aunt as a female ancestor who also broke the rules of tradition.

It is important to note that Kingston dwells the longest on what she admits to be the least likely scenario for her aunt--the love story. For a Chinese-American girl, this story is the most appealing, for it features an imaginative, brave, and unique woman who goes against the norm. This version, however, is highly unlikely because that kind of romantic love is a Western invention reinforced in the movies. Kingston alternates between a fantasy about a love affair and a more accurate historical reconstruction that honors the truth of the hard life of women in the old China. As a result, the reader must carefully follow the alternatives and digressions that characterize the chapter.

It is also important to remember that the book begins with a warning to keep silent, a theme that Kingston will return to again and again. Kingston is trying to establish her own voice as a Chinese-American woman, which is difficult. She comes out of a heritage, which silences women, and she is now forced to straddle two very different cultures. She identifies with her silent ancestor, who disobeyed the rules for women, and was squelched for it. Kingston brings this forgotten ancestor to life by creating different versions of the story to imbue the aunt with motivation, personality, and power. She also defies her mother's warning by telling the story.

Kingston intentionally includes several anachronisms in her story. For instance, she describes the aunt cleaning a wound with peroxide. It is very unlikely that in her country, her aunt would have had access to peroxide. She also refers to origami, a Japanese art form of folding paper that was unknown in the aunt's time. The anachronisms, however, seem normal as Kingston weaves the past and present together throughout the chapter. She begins the first section of the book in the past, when she was a young girl entering puberty, she then goes back to scenes and stories from China, then she jumps forward to the present when she is a mature woman writing her memoirs. In this interweaving of past and present, she is able to show the importance of her cultural past in her present life. She also sets a structural pattern for the entire book.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Maxine Kingston** - Kingston is a character-narrator. Though this is a book of memoirs, a non-fiction genre, in which the writer is referred to as the speaker or the persona, it is tempting to look at Kingston as a character constructed as if fictional. She is a person who has gone through a.....

**Brave Orchid** - Kingston's mother is an incredibly strong-willed woman and an overbearing mother who has a great influence on her daughter. In China, she went against thousands of years of custom to become a doctor. As a doctor, she combined the traditions of her culture with the new science of.....

**No Name Woman** - Kingston's aunt on her father's side has no name, because of a family oath to forget her existence. She was married to a man she did not know, as was customary, and after he left for the United States, she became pregnant by another man. Her.....

**The Woman Warrior** - Kingston, out of her own preoccupations as a Chinese-American, recreates an imaginary figure of legend and lore in the Woman Warrior. Two magical old people devotedly train her for fifteen years, and she returns to her village to take her father's place in war. She leads an.....

**Moon Orchid** - Brave Orchid's sister who has lived in Hong Kong for thirty years supported by a husband who left her for the United States and never returned or sent for her. Her.....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

The plot of these memoirs is non-linear. Instead of beginning as a child and proceeding through adulthood into middle age, Kingston goes back and forth between childhood and adulthood. Perhaps she conflates past and present because that is how she experiences her life. The past informs the present. In every moment of the present, she is reminded of some past incident that shapes her perception of herself and her present situation. There is an oblique plot to this book when one looks at it whole. It begins with Kingston totally.....

## **THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS**

Kingston devises a unique method of combining a family story with a cultural story. The family story of the struggle girls often go through of differentiating themselves from their mothers makes the book accessible to people who do not have the experience of living as a minority in a majority culture. The cultural story runs parallel to this family story.

As a member of a minority cultural group, Kingston had to negotiate between her mother's cultural values and her adoptive country's cultural values. As a child she found that both.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS – BOOK REPORT TOPICS**

1. Describe what Maxine's childhood was like in America. How is it different than her childhood in China? Describe Brave Orchid as a person. What affect does she have on her daughter Maxine?.....

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