

“Two Kinds” by Amy Tan: Study Questions

1. How would you describe the tone of the opening paragraph? How does it suggest that the reader should interpret the second paragraph? What insight into Jing-mei’s mother’s faith in America does the third paragraph provide?
2. What is the tone of the narrator’s description of her childhood “imaginings” at the top of page 1206? What does the next paragraph tell us about the source of these dreams?
3. What rhetorical effect does the list of tests toward the bottom of the page have? (“multiplying numbers in my head, finding the queen of hearts in a deck of cards,” etc.)
4. Discuss the tone and implications of the following sentence from page 1207: “She was proudly modest, like a proper Chinese child.” How does Waverly’s mother also display this quality on page 1209?
5. Why does the narrator learn to play “only the most ear-splitting preludes, the most discordant hymns” (page 1209)?
6. What is ironic about Jing-mei’s proclamation near the bottom of page 1209: “And right then I was determined to put a stop to her foolish pride”?
7. What do Jing-mei’s thoughts on page 1210 and 1211 reveal about her view of Chinese culture (see the bottom of 1210/top of 1211 and the bottom of 1211)? In what sense does her parents’ refusal to leave the talent show reflect pride and honor?
8. Why do you think Jing-mei wishes her mother would get upset (page 1211)? Why do you think her mother seems to be pleased that she is crying (page 1212)? What are the “worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of [her] chest”? What “magic words” does Jing-mei discover to use in her fight with her mother (page 1212), and why do you think they have such a profound effect? What rhetorical effect does the narrator’s use of the word “alakazam” have?
9. What is the significance of Jing-mei’s list of failures on page 1212? What does it mean to the narrator to “be me”?
10. What is the narrator implying with her comment on page 1213: “She said it as if announcing a fact that could never be disproved?” Given what the narrator says about herself in the rest of the story, what is ironic about her feelings about her mother’s attitude?
11. How would you describe the style of the narration? From what perspective is the story told, and how can you tell? (It’s told by Jing-mei in the first person, of course, but what more can you tell about the perspective of the narrator? Hint: Consider my use of “Jing-mei” in some questions and “the narrator” in others.)
12. What does the title of the story refer to? Why is it an appropriate title? What is the cause of Jing-mei’s rebellion against her mother, and what forms does it take in the story? What insight does the story give us into the narrator’s comment on page 1213 about the sweaters her mother had knitted being “all the colors [she] hated”?
13. What symbolic meaning do the titles of the two songs Jing-mei plays at the end of the story have? In what sense are they “two halves of the same song”? What changes does Jing-mei seem to have gone through by the end of the story, and what details suggest these changes?