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Part I

Fiction



Chapter 1



Introduction to Fiction



The word “fiction” comes from the Latin root “fingere,” meaning “to fashion or form.” In a broad sense, “fiction” is about telling stories that are not factual, or at least telling something partially real in an imaginary way. In contrast to non-fiction like news articles that are based on facts of what actually happened, fiction is an outcome of imagination, namely the fabricated account of things and persons. In the past two centuries, fiction as a literary genre has become more narrowly defined as “prose narrative about imaginary people and events,” which is the main meaning of the word as we use it in this textbook.

The history of fiction can date back to oral storytelling traditions in the early human civilizations, such as epics in ancient Greece and India. In the early 14th century, oral storytelling gradually developed into written form, most notably with Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*. Romance, a kind of prose narrative about the stories of knights and their courtly love and adventures, was a dominant form of fiction in medieval times and was supposed to be the predecessor of the novel.

Novel became the primary medium of fiction in the 18th and 19th centuries, so its development can best reflect the history of fiction. The word “novel” can mean “new.” In the 17th and 18th centuries, novel emerged as a new literary genre catering predominantly to the rising middle-class readership who developed a new literary interest in the portrayal of their own life experiences. Unlike medieval romance which focuses mainly on chivalry and adventures, novel is intended to depict the common life of common people. Therefore, a major difference between a novel and a romance is that the novel tries to reflect reality.

It is notable that in the early development of the novel, the boundary between the factual and the fictional was unclear and uncertain. For example, in the early or even middle years of the 18th century, prose narratives that are now regarded as novels were often called by other names such as “romance” or “history,” or most confusingly “true history” or “secret history.” The origin of the novel is complex and scholars tried to explain it in different approaches. For example, Michael McKeon attributed the origin of the English novel to the epistemological changes in the 17th century, especially the changes in questions of “truth” and “virtue.” Lennard J. Davis in his *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* argued that the novel originated from the news/novel discourse in 16th-century England, which was initially “an undifferentiated matrix,” but was gradually split into two subdivisions: news and novel, as a result of constant legal restrictions imposed on the discourse.

The 18th century saw the rise of the novel. As Ian Watt pointed out in his seminal

The Rise of the Novel, the rise of the novel in the 18th century was closely associated with an expanding middle-class reading public. The increasing literacy rate in 18th-century England and the emergence of middle-class readers, especially women readers, have greatly contributed to the rise of the novel. English novelists in the 18th century such as Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe, and Henry Fielding opened up the tradition of English novels. In its early development, novel was often deemed as artistically inferior to poetry.

The novel gradually developed into a mature and dominant literary form in the 19th century across Europe and America. Take novels in Victorian England for example. Novel was the dominant literary form of Victorian literature, and there emerged numerous outstanding novelists such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, and many others. These writers tended to present a careful description of everyday life, usually of the lower and middle classes. Together with an expanding middle-class readership, the popularity of magazines and circulating libraries also contributed to the rapid growth of novels. With an expanding literary market, novelists were able to make a comfortable living by writing novels. Novels were so popular in Victorian England that even Queen Victoria herself read *Jane Eyre*.

In contrast to 19th-century English fiction, modernist fiction that flourished in the 20th century emphasizes how to represent reality rather than what the reality is. Modernist fiction focuses more on psychological reality and endeavors to reveal the human condition through innovations in writing techniques. For example, modernist writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner all made use of stream of consciousness in different ways to show the inner life of humans. Compared with 19th-century novels, modernist fiction is also characterized by the use of open-ending and the shift of narrative perspectives.

One thing we need to keep in mind is that English fiction is diversified and international. Our understanding of English fiction should not be limited to the fiction written by white Anglo-Saxon males, nor should it be restricted to the fiction produced in the U.K. or the U.S. Fiction created in English-speaking countries like Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada is also an important part of English fiction tradition. Writers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have also greatly enriched English fiction in the 20th and 21st centuries. This ethnic and cultural diversity finds expression in the works of eminent contemporary writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Vladimir Nabokov, to name just a few.

Reading fiction is beneficial to us in many ways. Besides the pleasure of reading, it can enrich our understanding of different cultures as well as human life. Fiction is always about human experience, whether it is internal or external. Reading fiction means the fusion of our own experience and the imaginary experience presented in the fiction. Just like reading other forms of literature, reading fiction involves empathy. When reading fiction, readers enter the imaginary world created by the author, gain access to the inner lives of others, and bridge the gap between the fictional world and the real world by activating their imagination and empathy.

Fiction is usually divided into novel, novella, and short story, according to length. A novel is a work of prose fiction of about forty thousand words or more. A novella is a work of prose fiction of about twenty thousand to forty thousand words. The novella form was especially favored between about 1850 and 1950, largely because it could be more tightly controlled and concentrated than a long novel while focusing on the inner workings of a character. A short story is broadly defined as anywhere between one thousand and twenty thousand words. One expectation of a short story is that it may be read in a single sitting. The modern short story developed in the mid-19th century, partly because of the growing popularity of magazines.

Stories are a part of daily life in every culture. Stories are what we tell when we return from vacation or survive an accident or illness. They help us make sense of growing up and growing old, of a hurricane or a war, of the country and the world we live in. Consider the tale, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” which is well-known among different nations. Here is one way of telling it:

Once there was a village high in the mountains where everyone was born blind. One day, a traveler arrived from far away with many fancy things to sell and fine stories to tell. The villagers asked, “How did you travel so far and so high carrying so much?” The traveler said, “On my elephant.” “What is an elephant?” the villagers asked, having never heard of such an animal in their remote mountain village. “See for yourself,” the traveler replied.

The elders of the village were a little bit afraid of the strange-smelling creature that took up so much space in the middle of the village square. They could hear it breathing and munching on hay, and feel its slow, swaying movements disturbing the air around them. First, one elder reached out and felt its flapping ear. “An elephant is soft but rough, and flexible, like a leather fan.” Another grasped its back leg and said, “An elephant is a rough and hairy pillar.” A woman took hold of a tusk and gasped, “An elephant is a cool, smooth staff.” A young girl seized the tail and declared, “An elephant is a fringed rope.” Some others were stroking its sides, which were furrowed like a dry plowed field, and others determined that its head was an overturned washing tub attached to the water pipe.

Each villager argued with the others on the definition of the elephant. The cries of curiosity and angry debate mixed in the afternoon sun. Finally, someone suggested that a list could be made of all parts: The elephant had four pillars, one tub, two fans, a water pipe, and two staffs, and was covered in tough, hairy leather or dried mud. Four young mothers, sitting on a bench and comparing impressions, realized that the elephant was in fact an enormous animal with a stretched nose.

The different descriptions of the elephant are like different interpretations of a story.

Reading a story from any one aspect will not be sufficient to form a whole understanding. These blind men quarrel tirelessly because none of them can see; none of them can put all the evidence together to create a whole. This story actually criticize people who are too proud of what they think they know, for it's clear that various members of the community at first never agree entirely on one interpretation of the elephant. Instead, only when they compare and combine their various "readings" can they get a more satisfying, holistic understanding of the wonder.

When you read a story and want to grapple with what is new in the story, you'd better start by observing one part at a time and gradually try to understand how those parts work together to form a whole. In order to have a full picture of the story, it is important to become familiar with the basic elements of fiction. When reading fiction, you may ask questions like: What happens in the story? How is the story narrated? Who are the characters? What is the setting of the story? What does the story mean? What is the style of the prose? Each of them corresponds to the plot, narration and point of view, character, setting, theme, and style respectively.

The term "plot" is sometimes used to describe the events that make up a story or the main part of a story. Actually we use the term "action" in this way, reserving the term "plot" for the way the author sequences and arranges the events so as to shape our response and interpretation. Generally, there must be a cause-and-effect relationship between the events.

When we read fiction, our sense of who is telling us the story is as important as what happens. Fiction is always presented to us by a narrator, and we are often aware of the narrator's voice. Commonly, stories also reveal a distinct angle of vision or perspective from which the characters, events, and other aspects are viewed. Just as the verbal quality of narration is called "voice," the visual angle is called "focus." Both voice and focus are together referred to as "point of view." It is often a "someone" in a story that stays with us long after we have forgotten the details of "what," "where," and "how." Indeed, without a "someone," it is unlikely that anything would happen at all. That "someone" is the character of a story.

A character is any personage in a literary work who appears, acts, or is referred to as playing a part. While the plot addresses the question "What happened?," the characters are the "who" that drive these events forward and the setting establishes the "where" and "when" of the narrative. All action in fiction, as in the real world, takes place in a specific context or setting—a time and place and a social environment.

Understanding a story's theme is critical to deciphering the author's message in a particular piece of writing. The theme of a story is its underlying message or "big idea." This idea transcends cultural barriers. It is usually universal in nature. When a theme is universal, it touches on the human experience, regardless of race or language. The theme, different from subject or topic, refers to what the story is generally about. The style is the manner of expression of a particular writer, school, period, or genre, produced by choice of words, use of literary devices, and so forth. It is the combined qualities that distinguish one category from another.

Chapter 2



Plot



Every story is an attempt to answer three main questions: What happened? What will happen next? How will things turn out? Responsive readers will often pause to answer these questions, trying to articulate what their expectations are, how the story has shaped them, how it will continue, and whether those expectations will be met in the story. These questions are related to the plot of a story.

✦ What Is Plot?

The term “plot” is used to describe the events that make up a story or the main part of a story. The plot is not a series of random incidents; generally, there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the events of a story. Thus, the plot is made up of a chain of events that are causally connected and make up the narrative. It refers to what actually occurs in a story and is one of storytelling’s major pillars. In fact, if the characters are the “who” and the theme is the “why,” then the plot is the “what” of the story.

Plot is the foundation of a story around which characters and settings are built. It is meant to organize information and events in a logical manner. As events happen, the progress of the story must be convincing and plausible to keep readers interested; this is why the causal connection between events is important. However, despite its significance, an author has to be careful that the plot does not dominate the other parts of the story, because in a good story all elements will remain in a balanced relationship.

What differentiates “plot” from “story”? As the British novelist and critic E. M. Forster notes, “The king died and then the queen died” is not a plot, for it has not been “tampered with.” But “The king died and then the queen died out of grief” is a plot because it reveals a causality in the sequence of events. The events can be organized as follows: The king gets ill (A); as a result of his illness, the king dies (B); because of the king’s death, the queen becomes grief-stricken (C); and due to excessive pain and suffering, the queen dies (D). In other words, one way the events of this short narrative could be organized is A-B-C-D; in this case, the plot and the story coincide.

But there are other ways the chain of events could be arranged and narrated. In organized A-B-C-D, the queen’s death at the end of the story will be unexpected and shock the reader. The very same A-B-C-D plot can be narrated in a story that begins with the death of the queen (D), then continues with the king’s death (B), then the queen’s pain

and grief (C), and finally the king's illness (A). This D-B-C-A story will have a different emotional effect: Since the reader is made aware of the queen's death at the beginning of the story, the unexpected element of shock will not exist; instead, the reader will, perhaps, focus on the close and romantic relationship between the king and the queen. So, the same plot can be narrated in two, or more, different stories, each with a different emotional effect on the reader.

✦ Plot Sections

There are five main phases, or elements, in a plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. These five phases might be described with different terms or might be divided into sub-sections, but the general idea will be the same as in Figure 1:

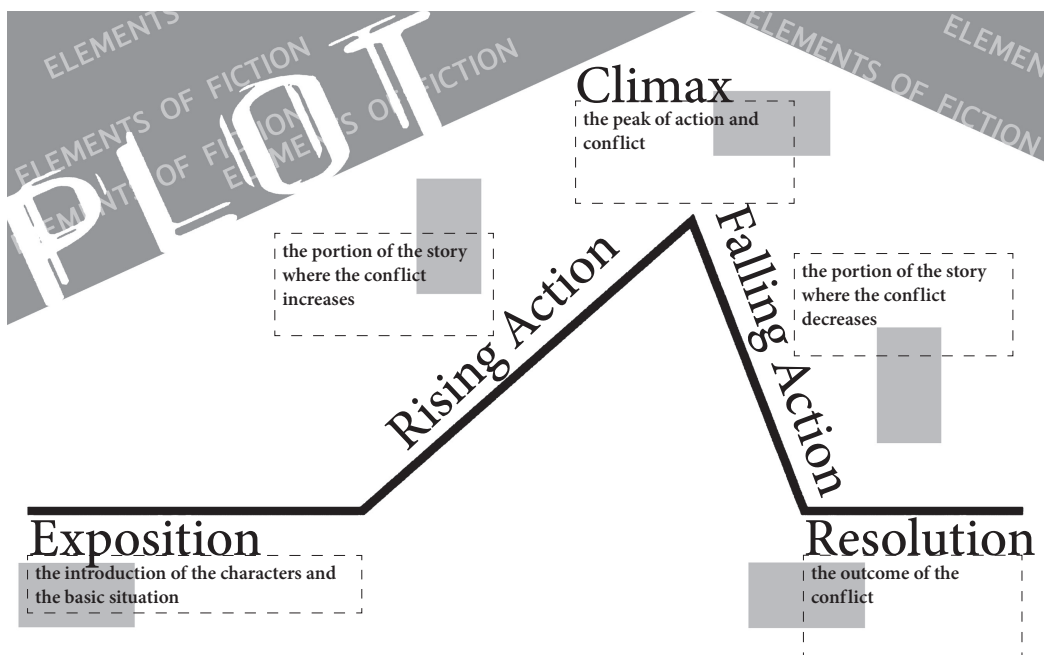


Figure 1. The general pattern of plot sections

Exposition

Exposition is the beginning of a story and it introduces the characters and describes the setting, the time and place the story is happening in, and the situation. In shorter works of fiction, the length of exposition might be from a few lines to a few paragraphs; in longer works of fiction, the exposition may go on for paragraphs, pages, or even sections.

In some longer works of fiction, the exposition may well be deferred until later phases of the plot. For instance, a character is introduced after a few sections, when the setting has been sufficiently described. The main function of the exposition is to familiarize the reader with the world of the story and the rules that govern the characters' lives—this is important because it establishes how characters will operate in the story.

Imagine this: In a small town at a particular time and place, the characters are introduced but one is emphasized because we learn more about her life, personal history, present job, and future plans—this character is a young woman who is currently a teacher in a small primary school but aspires to be an athletic champion and win a gold medal at the Olympics; she is training for local competitions scheduled in six months.

Rising Action

Rising action is the part of a story in which a series of events happen and gradually build up to and pave the way for the conflict of the story. The main characters have already been introduced in exposition; therefore, with rising action the narrative emphasizes the aspects that will be important to the creation of the conflict. Conflicts can be internal or external and can result from ambition, competition, enmity, jealousy, misunderstanding, etc. In rising action, the events of the story begin to get complicated and aspects of the conflict are highlighted. As characters interact with each other, an expectation is created about how things will progress in the story and how the conflict will emerge.

Imagine the rest of the story: We learn that even though the character aspires to participate in the local games, she cannot afford to purchase the professional gear needed in training. At the same time, people around her discourage her. Nevertheless, she will persist and try as hard as possible to compete for a medal at the local games as the first step toward her dream of winning a gold medal at the Olympics. Her internal conflict is to push herself forward under unfavorable conditions; one external conflict is to prove to people that it is possible to become a champion regardless of unfavorable conditions; another external conflict is to win against other contenders.

Climax

The climax or main point of the plot is a turning point in the story. It is where the conflict that has been brewing from the beginning finally happens. This climax is meant to be the moment of greatest emotional intensity, leaving the reader wondering what is going to happen next. It is also the moment when the outcome of the plot and the fate of the characters are decided.

In the aforementioned story, the determined young woman competes in the local games. Driven by her relentless ambition to challenge her limits, she finally wins the game. From here, the rest of the narrative must follow through: She will receive an invitation to join an athletic club for advanced training, setting the stage for her ultimate destination—

the Olympics. If the story is long enough, there will be multiple climaxes. Sometimes side stories are created to add dramatic effects—she falls in love, starts a business, etc.

Falling Action

Falling action, or the winding up of the story, brings a release of emotional tension and occurs when events and complications begin to resolve themselves. In shorter works of fiction, there is not enough space for multiple rising and falling actions; longer works, however, allow the author to create multiple storylines and different rising and falling actions. In the overall story curve, however, there is a moment when the conflicts happen and the characters leave that moment behind to continue their lives under new conditions.

Our aspiring athlete will at one point finally win the games she has been preparing for (the local games, the Olympics, etc.). After that, she might decide to act in different ways: train further and participate in other games; become a coach and train other athletes; or go back to her old job in her hometown. After the climax, the falling action proposes these options and gradually shows why the character will make the final decision.

Resolution

Resolution, or conclusion, is the end of a story. It gives a sense of closure because the conflicts have been resolved, if only temporarily and not necessarily in the way the reader or the characters expected. With resolution, we come to an understanding of how specific character traits lead to a conflictual situation and how it is resolved. Readers may or may not agree with the way characters behave or deal with their situations, but that is also the point of reading fiction. In the story we imagined, some readers may not agree with the character going back to her old job in her hometown; others might think that instead of becoming a coach, she should participate in further competitions.

Not all stories provide a clear conclusion—some stories are open-ended, meaning that a character can make two or more decisions, and the author might decide not to clarify that, leaving the completion of the story to the reader’s imagination. Story endings contribute to the theme—how characters act and make decisions reflects their worldviews. Some stories pose this as a question to the reader: “What would you do if you were in her shoes?” Readers are encouraged to reflect on the situation to better understand themselves and others.

✦ Plot Functions

As mentioned above, plot is one of the most important parts of a story and has different functions. First, it draws readers’ attention to important characters and their roles in the story. Second, it motivates the characters to affect the story and connects the events in an orderly manner. Plot also arouses readers’ desire to continue reading, holding their attention throughout the story and ensuring they want to know what happens next.

Plot leads to the climax by gradually unfolding the story. It is through the plot that a reader connects with the story and gets emotionally involved, not allowing himself or herself to put the book down. Eventually, by unfolding the entire story step by step, plot gives readers a sense of completion that they have finished reading and reached a conclusion.

Plot is what forms a memory in readers' mind, keeping them thinking about the story and even making them want to read it again. By identifying and analyzing the plot, the reader is able to understand the message being conveyed by the author and the explicit or implicit moral of the story.

✦ Sample Plots

The following are two very short stories with sample plots.

Kaitlin wants to buy a puppy. She goes to the pet shop and begins looking through the cages for her future pet. At the end of the hallway, she sees a small, sweet brown dog with a white spot on its nose. At that instant, she knows she wants to adopt it. After it receives shots and a medical check, she and the dog, Berkley, go home together.

In this example, the exposition introduces us to Kaitlin and her internal conflict—she wants a puppy but does not have one. The rising action occurs as she enters the pet shop and begins looking through the cages. The climax occurs when she sees the dog, Berkley, and decides to adopt it. The falling action consists of a quick medical check before the resolution, or ending, when Kaitlin and Berkley happily head home.

Scott wants to be on the football team, but he's worried he won't make it. He spends weeks working out as hard as possible, preparing for tryouts. At tryouts, he amazes the coaches with his skill as a quarterback. They ask him to be their starting quarterback that year and give him a jersey. Scott leaves the field, ecstatic!

In this example, the exposition introduces Scott and his conflict—he wants to be on the team but he doubts his ability to make it. The rising action consists of his training and tryouts and the climax occurs when the coaches tell him he's been chosen to be a quarterback. The falling action occurs when Scott takes a jersey and the resolution occurs when he leaves the tryouts as a new, happy quarterback.

Each of these stories has: 1) an exposition where characters and conflicts are introduced; 2) a rising action that brings the character to the climax as conflicts are developed; 3) a falling action and resolution where the story concludes.



Amy Tan
(b. 1952-)

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California, to parents who had emigrated from China. In 1987, a journey with her mother to visit China was a formative experience for Amy Tan as a writer. Many of her works explore mother-daughter relationships, delving into the conflicts that arise from generational and cultural differences, and portraying how both parties gradually achieve mutual understanding. Tan has written many bestselling novels, including *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005). *The Joy Luck Club* has been translated into 35 languages and was adapted into a commercially successful film in 1993. While *The Joy Luck Club* earned high praise, it also received criticism for perpetuating racist stereotypes about Asian Americans.

Half and Half

Amy Tan

As proof of her faith, my mother used to carry a small leatherette Bible when she went to the First Chinese Baptist Church every Sunday. But later, after my mother lost her faith in God, that leatherette Bible wound up wedged under a too-short table leg, a way for her to correct the imbalances of life. It's been there for over twenty years.

My mother pretends that Bible isn't there. Whenever anyone asks her what it's doing there, she says, a little too loudly, "Oh, this? I forgot." But I know she sees it. My mother is not the best housekeeper in the world, and after all these years that Bible is still clean white.

Tonight I'm watching my mother sweep under the same kitchen table, something she does every night after dinner. She gently pokes her broom around the table leg propped up by the Bible. I watch her, sweep after sweep, waiting for the right moment to tell her about Ted and me, that we're getting divorced. When I tell her, I know she's going to say, "This cannot be."

And when I say that it is certainly true, that our marriage is over, I know what else she will say: "Then you must save it."

And even though I know it's hopeless—there's absolutely nothing left to save—I'm afraid if I tell her that, she'll still persuade

me to try.

I think it's ironic that my mother wants me to fight the divorce. Seventeen years ago she was chagrined when I started dating Ted. My older sisters had dated only Chinese boys from church before getting married.

Ted and I met in a politics of ecology class when he leaned over and offered to pay me two dollars for the last week's notes. I refused the money and accepted a cup of coffee instead. This was during my second semester at UC Berkeley, where I had enrolled as a liberal arts major and later changed to fine arts. Ted was in his third year in pre-med, his choice, he told me, ever since he dissected a fetal pig in the sixth grade.

I have to admit that what I initially found attractive in Ted were precisely the things that made him different from my brothers and the Chinese boys I had dated: his brashness; the assuredness in which he asked for things and expected to get them; his opinionated manner; his angular face and lanky body; the thickness of his arms; the fact that his parents immigrated from Tarrytown, New York, not Tientsin, China.

My mother must have noticed these same differences after Ted picked me up one evening at my parents' house. When I returned home, my mother was still up, watching television.

"He is American," warned my mother, as if I had been too blind to notice. A *waigoren*."

"I'm American too," I said. "And it's not as if I'm going to marry him or something."

Mrs. Jordan also had a few words to say. Ted had casually invited me to a family picnic, the annual clan reunion held by the polo fields in Golden Gate Park. Although

we had dated only a few times in the last month—and certainly had never slept together, since both of us lived at home—Ted introduced me to all his relatives as his girlfriend, which, until then, I didn't know I was.

Later, when Ted and his father went off to play volleyball with the others, his mother took my hand, and we started walking along the grass, away from the crowd. She squeezed my palm warmly but never seemed to look at me.

"I'm so glad to meet you *finally*," Mrs. Jordan said. I wanted to tell her I wasn't really Ted's girlfriend, but she went on. "I think it's nice that you and Ted are having such a lot of fun together. So I hope you won't misunderstand what I have to say."

And then she spoke quietly about Ted's future, his need to concentrate on his medical studies, why it would be years before he could even think about marriage. She assured me she had nothing whatsoever against minorities; she and her husband, who owned a chain of office-supply stores, personally knew many fine people who were Oriental, Spanish, and even black. But Ted was going to be in one of those professions where he would be judged by a different standard, by patients and other doctors who might not be as understanding as the Jordans were. She said it was so unfortunate the way the rest of the world was, how unpopular the Vietnam War was.

"Mrs. Jordan, I am not Vietnamese," I said softly, even though I was on the verge of shouting. "And I have no intention of marrying your son."

When Ted drove me home that day, I

told him I couldn't see him anymore. When he asked me why, I shrugged. When he pressed me, I told him what his mother had said, verbatim, without comment.

"And you're just going to sit there! Let my mother decide what's right?" he shouted, as if I were a co-conspirator who had turned traitor. I was touched that Ted was so upset.

"What should we do?" I asked, and I had a pained feeling I thought was the beginning of love.

In those early months, we clung to each other with a rather silly desperation, because, in spite of anything my mother or Mrs. Jordan could say, there was nothing that really prevented us from seeing one another. With imagined tragedy hovering over us, we became inseparable, two halves creating the whole: yin and yang. I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up. It was exhilarating and draining. The emotional effect of saving and being saved was addicting to both of us.

"What should we do?" I continued to ask him. And within a year of our first meeting we were living together. The month before Ted started medical school at UCSF we were married in the Episcopal Church, and Mrs. Jordan sat in the front pew, crying as was expected of the groom's mother. When Ted finished his residency in dermatology, we bought a run-down three-story Victorian with a large garden in Ashbury Heights. Ted helped me set up a studio downstairs so I could take in work as a freelance production assistant for graphic artists.

Over the years, Ted decided where we went on vacation. He decided what new

furniture we should buy. He decided we should wait until we moved into a better neighborhood before having children. We used to discuss some of these matters, but we both knew the question would boil down to my saying, "Ted, you decide." After a while, there were no more discussions. Ted simply decided. And I never thought of objecting. I preferred to ignore the world around me, obsessing only over what was in front of me: my T-square, my X-acto knife, my blue pencil.

But last year Ted's feelings about what he called "decision and responsibility" changed. A new patient had come to him asking what she could do about the spidery veins on her cheeks. And when he told her he could suck the red veins out and make her beautiful again, she believed him. But instead, he accidentally sucked a nerve out, and the left side of her smile fell down and she sued him.

After he lost the malpractice lawsuit—his first, and a big shock to him I now realize—he started pushing me to make decisions. Did I think we should buy an American car or a Japanese car? Should we change from whole-life to term insurance? What did I think about that candidate who supported the contras? What about a family?

I thought about things, the pros and the cons. But in the end I would be so confused, because I never believed there was ever any one right answer, yet there were many wrong ones. So whenever I said, "You decide," or "I don't care," or "Either way is fine with me," Ted would say in his impatient voice, "No, *you* decide. You can't have it both ways, none of the responsibility, none of the blame."

I could feel things changing between us. A protective veil had been lifted and Ted now started pushing me about everything. He asked me to decide on the most trivial matters, as if he were baiting me. Italian food or Thai. One appetizer or two. Which appetizer. Credit card or cash. Visa or MasterCard.

Last month, when he was leaving for a two-day dermatology course in Los Angeles, he asked if I wanted to come along and then quickly, before I could say anything, he added, "Never mind, I'd rather go alone."

"More time to study," I agreed.

"No, because you can never make up your mind about anything," he said.

And I protested, "But it's only with things that aren't important."

"Nothing is important to you, then," he said in a tone of disgust.

"Ted, if you want me to go, I'll go."

And it was as if something snapped in him. "How the hell did we ever get married? Did you just say 'I do' because the minister said 'repeat after me'? What would you have done with your life if I had never married you? Did it ever occur to you?"

This was such a big leap in logic, between what I said and what he said, that I thought we were like two people standing apart on separate mountain peaks, recklessly leaning forward to throw stones at one another, unaware of the dangerous chasm that separated us.

But now I realize Ted knew what he was saying all along. He wanted to show me the rift. Because later that evening he called from Los Angeles and said he wanted a divorce.

Ever since Ted's been gone, I've been thinking, even if I had expected it, even if I had known what I was going to do with my life, it still would have knocked the wind out of me.

When something that violent hits you, you can't help but lose your balance and fall. And after you pick yourself up, you realize you can't trust anybody to save you—not your husband, not your mother, not God. So what can you do to stop yourself from tilting and falling all over again?

My mother believed in God's will for many years. It was as if she had turned on a celestial faucet and goodness kept pouring out. She said it was faith that kept all these good things coming our way, only I thought she said "fate," because she couldn't pronounce that "th" sound in "faith."

And later, I discovered that maybe it was fate all along, that faith was just an illusion that somehow you're in control. I found out the most *I* could have was hope, and with that I was not denying any possibility, good or bad. I was just saying, If there is a choice, dear God or whatever you are, here's where the odds should be placed.

I remember the day I started thinking this, it was such a revelation to me. It was the day my mother lost her faith in God. She found that things of unquestioned certainty could never be trusted again.

We had gone to the beach, to a secluded spot south of the city near Devil's Slide. My father had read in *Sunset* magazine that this was a good place to catch ocean perch. And although my father was not a fisherman but a pharmacist's assistant who had once been a doctor in China, he believed in his *nengkan*,

his ability to do anything he put his mind to. My mother believed she had *nengkan* to cook anything my father had a mind to catch. It was this belief in their *nengkan* that had brought my parents to America. It had enabled them to have seven children and buy a house in the Sunset district with very little money. It had given them the confidence to believe their luck would never run out, that the house gods had only benevolent things to report and our ancestors were pleased, that lifetime warranties meant our lucky streak would never break, that all the elements were in balance, the right amount of wind and water.

So there we were, the nine of us: my father, my mother, my two sisters, four brothers, and myself, so confident as we walked along our first beach. We marched in single file across the cool gray sand, from oldest to youngest. I was in the middle, fourteen years old. We would have made quite a sight, if anyone else had been watching, nine pairs of bare feet trudging, nine pairs of shoes in hand, nine black-haired heads turned toward the water to watch the waves tumbling in.

The wind was whipping the cotton trousers around my legs and I looked for some place where the sand wouldn't kick into my eyes. I saw we were standing in the hollow of a cove. It was like a giant bowl, cracked in half, the other half washed out to sea. My mother walked toward the right, where the beach was clean, and we all followed. On this side, the wall of the cove curved around and protected the beach from both the rough surf and the wind. And along this wall, in its shadow, was a reef

ledge that started at the edge of the beach and continued out past the cove where the waters became rough. It seemed as though a person could walk out to sea on this reef, although it looked very rocky and slippery. On the other side of the cove, the wall was more jagged, eaten away by the water. It was pitted with crevices, so when the waves crashed against the wall, the water spewed out of these holes like white gulleys.

Thinking back, I remember that this beach cove was a terrible place, full of wet shadows that chilled us and invisible specks that flew into our eyes and made it hard for us to see the dangers. We were all blind with the newness of this experience: a Chinese family trying to act like a typical American family at the beach.

My mother spread out an old striped bedspread, which flapped in the wind until nine pairs of shoes weighed it down. My father assembled his long bamboo fishing pole, a pole he had made with his own two hands, remembering its design from his childhood in China. And we children sat huddled shoulder to shoulder on the blanket, reaching into the grocery sack full of bologna sandwiches, which we hungrily ate salted with sand from our fingers.

Then my father stood up and admired his fishing pole, its grace, its strength. Satisfied, he picked up his shoes and walked to the edge of the beach and then onto the reef to the point just before it was wet. My two older sisters, Janice and Ruth, jumped up from the blanket and slapped their thighs to get the sand off. Then they slapped each other's back and raced off down the beach shrieking. I was about to get up and chase them, but my

mother nodded toward my four brothers and reminded me: “*Dangsyng tamende shenti*,” which means “Take care of them,” or literally, “Watch out for their bodies.” These bodies were the anchors of my life: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Bing. I fell back onto the sand, groaning as my throat grew tight, as I made the same lament: “Why?” Why did *I* have to care for them?

And she gave me the same answer: “*Yiding*.”^①

I must. Because they were my brothers. My sisters had once taken care of me. How else could I learn responsibility? How else could I appreciate what my parents had done for me?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke were twelve, ten, and nine, old enough to keep themselves loudly amused. They had already buried Luke in a shallow grave of sand so that only his head stuck out. Now they were starting to pat together the outlines of a sand-castle wall on top of him.

But Bing was only four, easily excitable and easily bored and irritable. He didn’t want to play with the other brothers because they had pushed him off to the side, admonishing him, “No, Bing, you’ll just wreck it.”

So Bing wandered down the beach, walking stiffly like an ousted emperor, picking up shards of rock and chunks of driftwood and flinging them with all his might into the surf. I trailed behind, imagining tidal waves and wondering what I would do if one appeared. I called to Bing every now and then, “Don’t go too close to the water. You’ll get your feet wet.” And I

thought how much I seemed like my mother, always worried beyond reason inside, but at the same time talking about the danger as if it were less than it really was. The worry surrounded me, like the wall of the cove, and it made me feel everything had been considered and was now safe.

The sun had shifted and moved over the other side of the cove wall. Everything had settled into place. My mother was busy keeping sand from blowing onto the blanket, then shaking sand out of shoes, and tacking corners of blankets back down again with the now clean shoes. My father was still standing at the end of the reef, patiently casting out, waiting for *nengkan* to manifest itself as a fish. I could see small figures farther down on the beach, and I could tell they were my sisters by their two dark heads and yellow pants. My brothers’ shrieks were mixed with those of seagulls. Bing had found an empty soda bottle and was using this to dig sand next to the dark cove wall. And I sat on the sand, just where the shadows ended and the sunny part began.

Bing was pounding the soda bottle against the rock, so I called to him, “Don’t dig so hard. You’ll bust a hole in the wall and fall all the way to China.” And I laughed when he looked at me as though he thought what I said was true. He stood up and started walking toward the water. He put one foot tentatively on the reef, and I warned him, “Bing.”

“I’m gonna see Daddy,” he protested.

“Stay close to the wall, then, away from the water,” I said. “Stay away from the mean

① *Yiding*: Must.

fish.”

And I watched as he inched his way along the reef, his back hugging the bumpy cove wall. I still see him, so clearly that I almost feel I can make him stay there forever.

I see him standing by the wall, safe, calling to my father, who looks over his shoulder toward Bing. How glad I am that my father is going to watch him for a while! Bing starts to walk over and then something tugs on my father’s line and he’s reeling as fast as he can.

Shouts erupt. Someone has thrown sand in Luke’s face and he’s jumped out of his sand grave and thrown himself on top of Mark, thrashing and kicking. My mother shouts for me to stop them. And right after I pull Luke off Mark, I look up and see Bing walking alone to the edge of the reef. In the confusion of the fight, nobody notices. I am the only one who sees what Bing is doing.

Bing walks one, two, three steps. His little body is moving so quickly, as if he spotted something wonderful by the water’s edge. And I think, *He’s going to fall in*. And just as I think this, his feet are already in the air, in a moment of balance, before he splashes into the sea and disappears without leaving so much as a ripple in the water.

I sank to my knees watching that spot where he disappeared, not moving, not saying anything. I couldn’t make sense of it. I was thinking, Should I run to the water and try to pull him out? Should I shout to my father? Can I rise on my legs fast enough? Can I take it all back and forbid Bing from joining my father on the ledge?

And then my sisters were back, and one

of them said, “Where’s Bing?” There was silence for a few seconds and then shouts and sand flying as everyone rushed past me toward the water’s edge. I stood there unable to move as my sisters looked by the cove wall, as my brothers scrambled to see what lay behind pieces of driftwood. My mother and father were trying to part the waves with their hands.

We were there for many hours. I remember the search boats and the sunset when dusk came. I had never seen a sunset like that: a bright orange flame touching the water’s edge and then fanning out, warming the sea. When it became dark, the boats turned their yellow orbs on and bounced up and down on the dark shiny water.

As I look back, it seems unnatural to think about the colors of the sunset and boats at a time like that. But we all had strange thoughts. My father was calculating minutes, estimating the temperature of the water, readjusting his estimate of when Bing fell. My sisters were calling, “Bing! Bing!” as if he were hiding in some bushes high above the beach cliffs. My brothers sat in the car, quietly reading comic books. And when the boats turned off their yellow orbs, my mother went for a swim. She had never swum a stroke in her life, but her faith in her own *nengkan* convinced her that what these Americans couldn’t do, she could. She could find Bing.

And when the rescue people finally pulled her out of the water, she still had her *nengkan* intact. Her hair, her clothes, they were all heavy with the cold water, but she stood quietly, calm and regal as a mermaid queen who had just arrived out of the sea. The police called off the search, put us all in

our car, and sent us home to grieve.

I had expected to be beaten to death, by my father, by my mother, by my sisters and brothers. I knew it was my fault. I hadn't watched him closely enough, and yet I saw him. But as we sat in the dark living room, I heard them, one by one whispering their regrets.

"I was selfish to want to go fishing," said my father.

"We shouldn't have gone for a walk," said Janice, while Ruth blew her nose yet another time.

"Why'd you have to throw sand in my face?" moaned Luke. "Why'd you have to make me start a fight?"

And my mother quietly admitted to me, "I told you to stop their fight. I told you to take your eyes off him."

If I had had any time at all to feel a sense of relief, it would have quickly evaporated, because my mother also said, "So now I am telling you, we must go and find him, quickly, tomorrow morning." And everybody's eyes looked down. But I saw it as my punishment: to go out with my mother, back to the beach, to help her find Bing's body.

Nothing prepared me for what my mother did the next day. When I woke up, it was still dark and she was already dressed. On the kitchen table was a thermos, a teacup, the white leatherette Bible, and the car keys.

"Is Daddy ready?" I asked.

"Daddy's not coming," she said.

"Then how will we get there? Who will drive us?"

She picked up the keys and I followed her out the door to the car. I wondered the

whole time as we drove to the beach how she had learned to drive overnight. She used no map. She drove smoothly ahead, turning down Geary, then the Great Highway, signaling at all the right times, getting on the Coast Highway and easily winding the car around the sharp curves that often led inexperienced drivers off and over the cliffs.

When we arrived at the beach, she walked immediately down the dirt path and over to the end of the reef ledge, where I had seen Bing disappear. She held in her hand the white Bible. And looking out over the water, she called to God, her small voice carried up by the gulls to heaven. It began with "Dear God" and ended with "Amen," and in between she spoke in Chinese.

I listened quietly as my mother said these words, horrified. And I began to cry when she added, "Forgive us for his bad manners. My daughter, this one standing here, will be sure to teach him better lessons of obedience before he visits you again."

After her prayer, her faith was so great that she saw him, three times, waving to her from just beyond the first wave. "*Nale!*"—There! And she would stand straight as a sentinel, until three times her eyesight failed her and Bing turned into a dark spot of churning seaweed.

My mother did not let her chin fall down. She walked back to the beach and put the Bible down. She picked up the thermos and teacup and walked to the water's edge. Then she told me that the night before she had reached back into her life, back when she was a girl in China, and this is what she had found.

"I remember a boy who lost his hand in

a firecracker accident,” she said. “I saw the shreds of this boy’s arm, his tears, and then I heard his mother’s claim that he would grow back another hand, better than the last. This mother said she would pay back an ancestral debt ten times over. She would use a water treatment to soothe the wrath of Chu Jung, the three-eyed god of fire. And true enough, the next week this boy was riding a bicycle, both hands steering a straight course past my astonished eyes!”

And then my mother became very quiet. She spoke again in a thoughtful, respectful manner.

“An ancestor of ours once stole water from a sacred well. Now the water is trying to steal back. We must sweeten the temper of the Coiling Dragon who lives in the sea. And then we must make him loosen his coils from Bing by giving him another treasure he can hide.”

My mother poured out tea sweetened with sugar into the teacup, and threw this into the sea. And then she opened her fist. In her palm was a ring of watery blue sapphire, a gift from her mother, who had died many years before. This ring, she told me, drew coveting stares from women and made them inattentive to the children they guarded so jealously. This would make the Coiling Dragon forgetful of Bing. She threw the ring into the water.

But even with this, Bing did not appear right away. For an hour or so, all we saw was seaweed drifting by. And then I saw her clasp her hands to her chest, and she said in a wondrous voice, “See, it’s because we were watching the wrong direction.” And I too saw Bing trudging wearily at the far end of the beach, his shoes hanging in his hand, his

dark head bent over in exhaustion. I could feel what my mother felt. The hunger in our hearts was instantly filled. And then the two of us, before we could even get to our feet, saw him light a cigarette, grow tall, and become a stranger.

“Ma, let’s go,” I said as softly as possible.

“He’s there,” she said firmly. She pointed to the jagged wall across the water. “I see him. He is in a cave, sitting on a little step above the water. He is hungry and a little cold, but he has learned now not to complain too much.”

And then she stood up and started walking across the sandy beach as though it were a solid paved path, and I was trying to follow behind, struggling and stumbling in the soft mounds. She marched up the steep path to where the car was parked, and she wasn’t even breathing hard as she pulled a large inner tube from the trunk. To this lifesaver, she tied the fishing line from my father’s bamboo pole. She walked back and threw the tube into the sea, holding onto the pole.

“This will go where Bing is. I will bring him back,” she said fiercely. I had never heard so much *nengkan* in my mother’s voice.

The tube followed her mind. It drifted out, toward the other side of the cove where it was caught by stronger waves. The line became taut and she strained to hold on tight. But the line snapped and then spiraled into the water.

We both climbed toward the end of the reef to watch. The tube had now reached the other side of the cove. A big wave smashed it into the wall. The bloated tube leapt up and then it was sucked in, under the wall and into a cavern. It popped out. Over and over

again, it disappeared, emerged, glistening black, faithfully reporting it had seen Bing and was going back to try to pluck him from the cave. Over and over again, it dove and popped back up again, empty but still hopeful. And then, after a dozen or so times, it was sucked into the dark recess, and when it came out, it was torn and lifeless.

At that moment, and not until that moment, did she give up. My mother had a look on her face that I'll never forget. It was one of complete despair and horror, for losing Bing, for being so foolish as to think she could use faith to change fate. And it made me angry—so blindingly angry—that everything had failed us.

I know now that I had never expected to find Bing, just as I know now I will never find a way to save my marriage. My mother tells me, though, that I should still try.

“What’s the point?” I say. “There’s no hope. There’s no reason to keep trying.”

“Because you must,” she says. “This is not hope. Not reason. This is your fate. This is your life, what you must do.”

“So what can I do?”

And my mother says, “You must think for yourself, what you must do. If someone tells you, then you are not trying.” And then she walks out of the kitchen to let me think about this.

I think about Bing, how I knew he was in danger, how I let it happen. I think about my marriage, how I had seen the signs, really I had. But I just let it happen. And I think now that fate is shaped half by expectation, half by inattention. But somehow, when you lose something you love, faith takes over. You have to pay attention to what you lost. You have to undo the expectation.

My mother, she still pays attention to it. That Bible under the table, I know she sees it. I remember seeing her write in it before she wedged it under.

I lift the table and slide the Bible out. I put the Bible on the table, flipping quickly through the pages, because I know it’s there. On the page before the New Testament begins, there’s a section called “Deaths,” and that’s where she wrote “Bing Hsu” lightly, in erasable pencil.

Questions for Discussion ❖

1. Analyze the plot of “Half and Half” and outline how the plot unfolds within the story.
2. Amy Tan’s “Half and Half” contains a story within the story. Why does Tan arrange the events in this way?
3. How do you understand the function and the symbolic meaning of “a small leatherette Bible” at the beginning?
4. What is the climax or turning point of the story? How does it influence the narrative?
5. Is “Half and Half” an open-ended story or does it have a resolution?