Maxine Hong Kingston (1940– )

Maxine Hong Kingston burst onto the literary scene in 1976 with an extraordinary and innovative book—The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. Kingston, who was born in California of Chinese immigrant parents, uses a mixture of autobiography, myth, poetic meditation, and fiction to convey her memories and feelings about growing up in a strange world (the United States) populated by what she and her family thought of as white-skinned “ghosts.”

The book received immediate acclaim. William McPherson of The Washington Post wrote: “The Woman Warrior is a strange, sometimes savagely terrifying and, in the literal sense, wonderful story about growing up caught between two highly sophisticated and utterly alien cultures, both vivid, often menacing, and equally mysterious.” Paul Gray said in Time: “Exiles and refugees tell sad stories of the life they left behind. Even sadder, sometimes, is the muteness of their children. They are likely to find the old ways and old language excess baggage, especially if their adopted homeland is the United States, where the race is to the swift and the adaptable. Thus a heritage of centuries can die in a generation of embarrassed silence. The Woman Warrior gives that silence a voice.”

When The Woman Warrior won the National Book Critics Circle Award for general nonfiction in 1976, Kingston gained national attention. The suddenness of her appearance as an important literary figure was startling.

Where had Kingston been until the age of thirty-six? Named for an American woman in the gambling house where her father worked for a time, Maxine Hong grew up in the Chinatown of Stockton, California. She earned a B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1962 and married the actor Earll Kingston. After their son was born, the Kingstons lived in Hawaii for a time, where Maxine taught English at the high school and college levels, before returning to California.

In 1980, Kingston published a companion piece to The Woman Warrior, a kind of ancestral history called China Men. The critic Susan Currier has described this book as “a sort of vindication of all the Chinese who helped build America but who were rewarded with abuse and neglect.” In 1988, Kingston published an extravagant novel called Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book, blending Chinese history and myth and vivid storytelling in the adventures of a young Chinese American named Wittman Ah Sing. The noted novelist Anne Tyler called Tripmaster Monkey “a novel of satisfying complexity and bite and verve.” In the 1990s, Kingston taught creative writing at the University of California at Berkeley and worked on a book of nonfiction.

Despite the attention given to her books, Kingston has remained relatively private. She seldom gives interviews or appears at public readings. In her two memoirs she does not answer all of the personal questions raised by her writing. In the selection that follows, even a careful reader will not be able to decide what is truth, what is fiction, and what is simply left unsaid. This ambiguity gives Kingston’s work much of its haunting quality.
Before You Read

The Girl Who Wouldn’t Talk

Make the Connection
It happens just about every day to all of us. For one reason or another, we don’t tell others what we really think or feel about something important. Out of self-doubt, politeness, fear, or even because we are trying to keep the truth from ourselves, we are silent. Sometimes we act out what we don’t say in ways that hurt ourselves and others, but at other times we find positive ways that express our feelings in writing, painting, music, or some other art form.

Literary Focus Characterization
Just like fiction writers, nonfiction writers use all the devices of characterization to bring the people in their texts to life. It is the expert use of these fictional devices that sometimes makes us feel as if we are reading fiction—when what we are reading is supposed to be factually true.

Maxine Hong Kingston reveals the personalities of her narrator and the other characters in her memoir (mem’wär’) by describing how they look, dress, act, and speak (including if they speak). She also shows us how her characters affect other people and what other people think of them. Since Kingston writes in the first person, we are also given access to the private thoughts and feelings of the narrator.

Reading Skills Drawing Inferences About Characters
As you read, take notes on how the writer characterizes the narrator and the silent girl. Look for clues that reveal how the narrator views her white American classmates and how she feels about them. Then, stop near the top of page 1088, and write down what you think the silent girl is not saying—that is, what are her unexpressed thoughts and feelings? You might also jot down what you think the narrator is not saying.

Background
The Chinese American family in this excerpt from The Woman Warrior lives in Stockton, California. Just before the episode starts, the narrator describes Chinese voices, which she says are louder than American voices. Describing her own voice, the narrator says, “You could hear splinters in my voice, bones rubbing jagged against one another. I was loud, though. I was glad I didn’t whisper.” The “ghosts” mentioned by the narrator are white Americans, who seemed so strange to this Chinese family.

Vocabulary Development
loitered (loit’ard) v.: spent time; hung around.
nape n.: back of the neck.
habitually (ha-bich’o-o-ə-lê) adv.: usually; by habit.
sarcastic (sär’kas’tik) adj.: scornful; mocking.
temples (tem’palz) n. pl.: sides of the forehead, just above and in front of the ears.

Maxine Hong Kingston

1081
Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. Once a year the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy, but our voices would straighten out, unpredictably normal, for the therapists. Some of us gave up, shook our heads, and said nothing, not one word. Some of us could not even shake our heads. At times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage. Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school.

She was a year older than I and was in my class for twelve years. During all those years she read aloud but would not talk. Her older sister was usually beside her; their parents kept the older daughter back to protect the younger one. They were six and seven years old when they began school. Although I had flunked kindergarten, I was the same age as most other students in our class; my parents had probably lied about my age, so I had had a head start and came out even. My younger sister was in the class below me; we were normal ages and normally separated. The parents of the quiet girl, on the other hand, protected both daughters. When it sprinkled, they kept them home from school. The girls did not work for a living the way we did. But in other ways we were the same.

We were similar in sports. We held the bat on our shoulders until we walked to first base. (You got a strike only when you actually struck at the ball.) Sometimes the pitcher wouldn’t bother to throw to us. “Automatic walk,” the other children would call, sending us on our way. By fourth or fifth grade, though, some of us would try to hit the ball. “Easy out,” the other kids would say. I hit the ball a couple of times. Baseball was nice in that there was a definite spot to run to after hitting the ball. Basketball confused me because when I caught the ball I didn’t know whom to throw it to. “Me. Me,” the kids would be yelling. “Over here.” Suddenly it would occur to me I hadn’t memorized which ghosts were on my team and which were on the other. When the kids said, “Automatic walk,” the girl who was quieter than I knelted with one end of the bat in each hand and placed it carefully on the plate. Then she dusted her hands as she walked to first base, where she rubbed her hands softly, fingers spread. She always got tagged out before second base. She would whisper—read but not talk. Her whisper was as soft as if she had no muscles. She seemed to be breathing from a distance. I heard no anger or tension.

I joined in at lunchtime when the other students, the Chinese too, talked about whether or not she was mute, although obviously she was not if she could read aloud. People told how they had tried their best to be friendly. They said hello, but if she refused to answer, well, they didn’t see why they had to say hello anymore. She had no friends of her own but followed her sister everywhere, although people and she herself probably thought I was her friend. I also followed her sister about, who was fairly normal. She was almost two years older and read more than anyone else.

I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute.

One afternoon in the sixth grade (that year I was arrogant with talk, not knowing there were going to be high school dances and college seminars to set me back), I and my little sister and the quiet girl and her big sister stayed late after school for some reason. The cement was cooling, and the tetherball poles made shadows across the gravel. The hooks at the rope ends were clinking against the poles. We shouldn’t have been so late; there was laundry work to do and Chinese school to get to by 5:00. The last time we had stayed late, my mother had phoned the police and told them we had been kid-napped by bandits. The radio stations broadcast our descriptions. I had to get home before she
did that again. But sometimes if you loitered long enough in the schoolyard, the other children would have gone home and you could play with the equipment before the office took it away. We were chasing one another through the playground and in and out of the basement, where the playroom and lavatory were. During air raid drills (it was during the Korean War, which you knew about because every day the front page of the newspaper printed a map of Korea with the top part red and going up and down like a window shade), we curled up in this basement. Now everyone was gone. The playroom was army green and had nothing in it but a long trough with drinking spigots in rows. Pipes across the ceiling led to the drinking fountains and to the toilets in the next room. When someone flushed you could hear the water and other matter, which the children named, running inside the big pipe above the drinking spigots. There was one playroom for girls next to the girls’ lavatory and one playroom for boys next to the boys’ lavatory. The stalls were open and the toilets had no lids, by which we knew that ghosts have no sense of shame or privacy.

Inside the playroom the lightbulbs in cages had already been turned off. Daylight came in X-patterns through the caging at the windows. I looked out and, seeing no one in the schoolyard, ran outside to climb the fire escape upside down, hanging on to the metal stairs with fingers and toes.

I did a flip off the fire escape and ran across the schoolyard. The day was a great eye, and it was not paying much attention to me now. I could disappear with the sun; I could turn quickly sideways and slip into a different world. It seemed I could run faster at this time, and by evening I would be able to fly. As the afternoon wore on we could run into the forbidden places—the boys’ big yard, the boys’ playroom. We could go into the boys’ lavatory and look at the urinals. The only time during school hours I had crossed the boys’ yard was when a flatbed truck with a giant thing covered with canvas and tied down with ropes had parked across the street. The children had told one another that it was a gorilla in captivity; we couldn’t decide whether the sign said “Trail of the Gorilla” or “Trial of the Gorilla.” The thing was as big as a house. The teachers couldn’t stop us from hysterically rushing to the fence and clinging to the wire mesh. Now I ran across the boys’ yard clear to the Cyclone fence and thought about the hair that I had seen sticking out of the canvas. It was going to be summer soon, so you could feel that freedom coming on too.

I ran back into the girls’ yard, and there was the quiet sister all by herself. I ran past her, and she followed me into the girls’ lavatory. My footsteps rang hard against cement and tile because of the taps I had nailed into my shoes. Her footsteps were soft, padding after me. There was no one in the lavatory but the two of us. I ran all around the rows of twenty-five open stalls to make sure of that. No sisters. I think we must have been playing hide-and-go-seek. She was not good at hiding by herself and usually followed her sister; they’d hide in the same place. They must have gotten separated. In this growing twilight, a child could hide and never be found.

I stopped abruptly in front of the sinks, and she came running toward me before she could stop herself, so that she almost collided with me. I walked closer. She backed away, puzzlement, then alarm in her eyes.

“You’re going to talk,” I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. “I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl.” She stopped backing away and stood fixed.

I looked into her face so I could hate it close up. She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby-soft. I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. I could poke dimples into her cheeks. I could work her face around like dough. She stood still, and I did not want to look at her face anymore; I hated

Vocabulary
loitered (loit’ard) v.: spent time; hung around.
fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Mexican and Negro girls did when they fought, so tough. I hated her weak neck, the way it did not support her head but let it droop; her head would fall backward. I stared at the curve of her nape. I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck. I grew my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-stem neck. I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more.

I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek, not doughy, but meat, between my thumb and finger. This close, and I saw no pores. “Talk,” I said. “Are you going to talk?” Her skin was fleshy, like squid out of which the glassy blades of bones had been pulled. I wanted tough skin, hard brown skin. I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails, which I cut straight across to make stubby fingers. I gave her face a squeeze. “Talk.” When I let go, the pink rushed back into my white thumbprint on her skin. I walked around to her side. “Talk!” I shouted into the side of her head. Her straight hair hung, the same all these years, no ringlets or braids or permanents. I squeezed her other cheek. “Are you? Huh? Are you going to talk?” She tried to shake her head, but I had hold of her face. She had no muscles to jerk away. Her skin seemed to stretch. I let go in horror. What if it came away in my hand? “No, huh?” I said, rubbing the touch of her off my fingers. “Say ‘No,’ then,” I said. I gave her another pinch and a twist. “Say ‘No.’” She shook her head, her straight hair turning with her head, not swinging side to side like the pretty girls’. She was so neat. Her neatness bothered me. I hated the way she folded the wax paper from her lunch; she did not wad her brown paper bag and her school papers. I hated her clothes—the blue pastel cardigan, the white blouse with the collar that lay flat over the cardigan, the homemade flat, cotton skirt she wore when everybody else was wearing flared skirts. I hated pastels; I would wear black always. I squeezed again, harder, even though her cheek had a weak rubbery feeling I did not like. I squeezed one cheek, then the other, back and forth until the tears ran out of her eyes as if I had pulled them out. “Stop crying,” I said, but although she habitually followed me around, she did not obey. Her eyes dripped; her nose dripped. She wiped her eyes with her papery fingers. The skin on her hands and arms seemed powdery-dry, like tracing paper, onion paper. I hated her fingers. I could snap them like breadsticks. I pushed her hands down. “Say ‘Hi,’” I said. “‘Hi.’ Like that. Say your name. Go ahead. Say it. Or are you stupid? You’re so stupid, you don’t know your own name, is that it? When I say, ‘What’s your name?’ you just blurt it out, O.K.? What’s your name?” Last year the whole class had laughed at a boy who couldn’t fill out a form because he didn’t know his father’s name. The teacher sighed, exasperated and was very sarcastic, “Don’t you notice things? What does your mother call him?” she said. The class laughed at how dumb he was not to notice things. “She calls him father of me,” he said. Even we laughed although we knew that his mother did not call his father by name, and a son does not

Vocabulary

**nape** *n.* back of the neck.

**habitually** *(ha-bich’ ə-bə-lə)* **adv.** usually; by habit.

**sarcastic** *(sər-kas’tik)* **adj.** scornful; mocking.
know his father’s name. We laughed and were relieved that our parents had had the foresight to tell us some names we could give the teachers. “If you’re not stupid,” I said to the quiet girl, “what’s your name?” She shook her head, and some hair caught in the tears; wet black hair stuck to the side of the pink and white face. I reached up (she was taller than I) and took a strand of hair. I pulled it. “Well, then, let’s honk your hair,” I said. “Honk. Honk.” Then I pulled the other side—“ho-o-n-nk”—a long pull; “ho-o-n-n-nk”—a longer pull. I could see her little white ears, like white cutworms curled underneath the hair. “Talk!” I yelled into each cutworm.

I looked right at her. “I know you talk,” I said. “I’ve heard you.” Her eyebrows flew up. Something in those black eyes was startled, and I pursued it. “I was walking past your house when you didn’t know I was there. I heard you yell in English and in Chinese. You weren’t just talking.

You were shouting. I heard you shout. You were saying, ‘Where are you?’ Say that again. Go ahead, just the way you did at home.” I yanked harder on the hair, but steadily, not jerking. I did not want to pull it out. “Go ahead. Say, ‘Where are you?’ Say it loud enough for your sister to come. Call her. Make her come help you. Call her name. I’ll stop if she comes. So call. Go ahead.”

She shook her head, her mouth curved down, crying. I could see her tiny white teeth, baby teeth. I wanted to grow big strong yellow teeth. “You do have a tongue,” I said. “So use it.” I pulled the hair at her temples, pulled the tears out of her eyes. “Say, ‘Ow?’” I said. “Just ‘Ow.’ Say, ‘Let go.’ Go ahead. Say it. I’ll honk you again.

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**Vocabulary**

**temples** (tem’pals) *n.* pl.: sides of the forehead, just above and in front of the ears.

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**A CLOSER LOOK: CULTURAL INFLUENCES**

**The Chinese American Family**

In her story, Maxine Hong Kingston mentions that the girl who wouldn’t talk was supported and protected by her family. This isn’t surprising, given the importance of family relationships in Chinese culture. As the Chinese American writer Leslie Li notes, solitude is not a coveted state among most Chinese people. “They love their family and friends and want them around, along with the renao they bring, the heat and noise of human relationships.”

**Family ties.** In Chinese culture, one’s name does not so much signify individual identity as relationship to others, such as daughter, son, aunt, uncle, and so on. In Chinese tradition the family name is given first—for example, “Chan Jackie,” not the Americanized “Jackie Chan”—and family members are often introduced not by their names but by their family relationships. Children may address family members not by name but as Aunt, Second Older Brother, Grandfather, and so on. In Kingston’s story a boy is laughed at in class because he doesn’t know his father’s name; at home, he says, his father is called only “father of me.” In the story “Rules of the Game” by the Chinese American writer
if you don’t say, ‘Let me alone.’ Say, ‘Leave me alone,’ and I’ll let you go. I will. I’ll let go if you say it. You can stop this anytime you want to, you know. All you have to do is tell me to stop. Just say, ‘Stop.’ You’re just asking for it, aren’t you? You’re just asking for another honk. Well then, I’ll have to give you another honk. Say, ‘Stop.’” But she didn’t. I had to pull again and again.

Sounds did come out of her mouth, sobs, chokes, noises that were almost words. Snot ran out of her nose. She tried to wipe it on her hands, but there was too much of it. She used her sleeve. “You’re disgusting,” I told her. “Look at you, snot streaming down your nose, and you won’t say a word to stop it. You’re such a nothing.” I moved behind her and pulled the hair growing out of her weak neck. I let go. I stood silent for a long time. Then I screamed, “Talk!” I would scare the words out of her. If she had had

little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them—crunch!—stomped on them with my iron shoes. She cried hard, sobbing aloud. “Cry, ‘Mama,’” I said. “Come on. Cry, ‘Mama.’ Say, ‘Stop it.’”

I put my finger on her pointed chin. “I don’t like you. I don’t like the weak little toots you make on your flute. Wheeze. Wheeze. I don’t like the way you don’t swing at the ball. I don’t like the way you’re the last one chosen. I don’t like the way you can’t make a fist for tetherball. Why don’t you make a fist? Come on. Get tough. Come on. Throw fists.” I pushed at her long hands; they swung limply at her sides. Her fingers were so long, I thought maybe they had an extra joint. They couldn’t possibly make fists like other people’s. “Make a fist,” I said. “Come on. Just fold those fingers up; fingers on the inside, thumbs on the outside. Say some-

Amy Tan (page 1017), the character Waverly is called “Waverly” for the benefit of outsiders, but at home she is “Meimei” (Little Sister).

**Bridging two worlds.** Ultimately many Chinese Americans choose to integrate the cultures of both China and the United States in their family life. They embrace some traditional beliefs of their immigrant parents or grandparents, but they also take part in mainstream American traditions. They may celebrate both Chinese and American holidays, for example, or enjoy traditional Chinese foods one day, grilled

steak the next. They may use American names with outsiders but their Chinese middle names at home. In addition to attending regular public or private school all day, some Chinese American children spend three or four hours at Chinese school (often held on Saturdays), where their parents expect them to learn Chinese language, literature, history, and philosophy.
thing. Honk me back. You’re so tall, and you let
me pick on you.

“Would you like a hanky? I can’t get you one
with embroidery on it or crocheting along the
edges, but I’ll get you some toilet paper if you
tell me to. Go ahead. Ask me. I’ll get it for you if
you ask.” She did not stop crying. “Why don’t
ahead.” She cried on. “O.K. O.K. Don’t talk. Just
scream, and I’ll let you go. Won’t that feel good?
Go ahead. Like this.” I screamed not too loudly.
My voice hit the tile and rang it as if I had
thrown a rock at it. The stalls opened wider and
the toilets wider and darker. Shadows leaned at
angles I had not seen before. It was very late.
Maybe a janitor had locked me in with this girl
for the night. Her black eyes blinked and stared,
blinked and stared. I felt dizzy from
hunger. We had been
in this lavatory to-
gether forever. My
mother would call the
police again if I didn’t
bring my sister home
soon. “I’ll let you go if
you say just one word,”
I said. “You can even
say ‘a’ or ‘the,’ and I’ll let
you go. Come on.
Please.” She didn’t shake
her head anymore, only
cried steadily, so much
water coming out of her. I could see the two
duct holes where the tears welled out. Quarts of
tears but no words. I grabbed her by the shoul-
der. I could feel bones. The light was coming in
querely through the frosted glass with the
chicken wire embedded in it. Her crying was
like an animal’s—a seal’s—and it echoed
around the basement. “Do you want to stay here
all night?” I asked. “Your mother is wondering
what happened to her baby. You wouldn’t want
to have her mad at you. You’d better say some-
thing.” I shook her shoulder. I pulled her hair
again. I squeezed her face. “Come on! Talk! Talk!
Talk!” She didn’t seem to feel it anymore when I
pulled her hair. “There’s nobody here but you
and me. This isn’t a classroom or a playground
or a crowd. I’m just one person. You can talk in
front of one person. Don’t make me pull harder
and harder until you talk.” But her hair seemed
to stretch; she did not say a word. “I’m going to
pull harder. Don’t make me pull anymore, or
your hair will come out and you’re going to be
bald. Do you want to be bald? You don’t want to
be bald, do you?”

Far away, coming from the edge of the town, I
heard whistles blow. The cannery was changing
shifts, letting out the afternoon people, and still
we were here at school. It was a sad sound—
work done. The air was lonelier after the sound
died.

“Why won’t you talk?” I started to cry. What
if I couldn’t stop, and everyone would want to
know what happened?

“No look what you’ve
done,” I scolded.
“Your going to pay
for this. I want to
know why. And you’re
going to tell me why.
You don’t see I’m try-
ing to help you out,
do you? Do you want
to be like this, dumb
doyou know what
dumb means?), your
whole life? Don’t
you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pam-
pom girl? What are you going to do for a living?
Yeah, you’re going to have to work because you
can’t be a housewife. Somebody has to marry
you before you can be a housewife. And you,
you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all
you are if you don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you
can’t have a personality. You’ll have no personal-
ity and no hair. You’ve got to let people know
you have a personality and a brain. You think
somebody is going to take care of you all your
stupid life? You think you’ll always have your big
sister? You think somebody’s going to marry
you, is that it? Well, you’re not the type that gets
dates, let alone gets married. Nobody’s going to
notice you. And you have to talk for interviews,
speak right up in front of the boss. Don’t you know that? You’re so dumb. Why do I waste my time on you?” Sniffing and snorting, I couldn’t stop crying and talking at the same time. I kept wiping my nose on my arm, my sweater lost somewhere (probably not worn because my mother said to wear a sweater). It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person. “I’m doing this for your own good,” I said. “Don’t you dare tell anyone I’ve been bad to you. Talk. Please talk.”

I was getting dizzy from the air I was gulping. Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternating. “I don’t understand why you won’t say just one word,” I cried, clenching my teeth. My knees were shaking, and I hung on to her hair to stand up. Another time I’d stayed too late, I had had to walk around two Negro kids who were bonking each other’s head on the concrete. I went back later to see if the concrete had cracks in it. “Look. I’ll give you something if you talk. I’ll give you my pencil box. I’ll buy you some candy. O.K.? What do you want? Tell me. Just say it, and I’ll give it to you. Just say, ‘yes,’ or, ‘O.K.,” or, ‘Baby Ruth.’” But she didn’t want anything.

I had stopped pinching her cheek because I did not like the feel of her skin. I would go crazy if it came away in my hands. “I skinned her,” I would have to confess.

Suddenly I heard footsteps hurrying through the basement, and her sister ran into the lavatory calling her name. “Oh, there you are,” I said. “We’ve been waiting for you. I was only trying to teach her to talk. She wouldn’t cooperate, though.” Her sister went into one of the stalls and got handfuls of toilet paper and wiped her off. Then we found my sister, and we walked home together. “Your family really ought to force her to speak,” I advised all the way home. “You mustn’t pamper her.”

The world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness. There was no pain and no symptoms, though the middle line in my left palm broke in two. Instead of starting junior high school, I lived like the Victorian recluses.° I read about. I had a rented hospital bed in the living room, where I watched soap operas on TV, and my family cranked me up and down. I saw no one but my family, who took good care of me. I could have no visitors, no other relatives, no villagers. My bed was against the west window, and I watched the seasons change the peach tree. I had a bell to ring for help. I used a bedpan. It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened.

But one day my mother, the doctor, said, “You’re ready to get up today. It’s time to get up and go to school.” I walked about outside to get my legs working, leaning on a staff I cut from the peach tree. The sky and trees, the sun were immense—no longer framed by a window, no longer grayed with a fly screen. I sat down on the sidewalk in amazement—the night, the stars. But at school I had to figure out again how to talk. I met again the poor girl I had tormented. She had not changed. She wore the same clothes, hair cut, and manner as when we were in elementary school, no make-up on the pink and white face, while the other Asian girls were starting to tape their eyelids. She continued to be able to read aloud. But there was hardly any reading aloud anymore, less and less as we got into high school.

I was wrong about nobody taking care of her. Her sister became a clerk—typist and stayed unmarried. They lived with their mother and father. She did not have to leave the house except to go to the movies. She was supported. She was protected by her family, as they would normally have done in China if they could have afforded it, not sent off to school with strangers, ghosts, boys.

°Victorian recluses: characters in Victorian novels who, because of some illness or incapacity, lived shut away from the world.
Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. What reasons does the narrator give for hating the silent girl? What do the other students think of the silent one?
2. How does the narrator try to make the silent girl talk? How does the girl respond?
3. What happens to the narrator to make her say that "the world is sometimes just"?

Thinking Critically

4. The narrator's intense anger seems directed solely at the silent girl, but why is she so angry with her? Perhaps she is angry for other reasons and not admitting her feelings. Is she affected by an internal conflict—a struggle occurring in her own mind? Explain your response, using details from the text.
5. The author characterizes the narrator by showing us what she says, does, thinks, and feels, but we can also make inferences about her character based on what she does not express. What, for example, do you think the narrator does not say about her white American classmates? (Check your reading notes.)

6. Imagery is the use of language to evoke a picture of a person, a place, or a thing. Find the images that Kingston uses to help us imagine the silent girl's skin, her fingers, her ears, and her crying. What do these images reveal about the narrator's feelings toward the silent girl? What can you infer about the narrator from her description of the girl?

7. The silent girl is obviously able to speak. Why do you think she does not speak? (Review the notes you made while reading.) What do you imagine she is thinking and feeling—but not saying?

8. What inference can you draw from the fact that the narrator says that her time in bed "was the best year and a half of my life"? What discoveries about herself or about the silent girl might she have made during that time?

9. Review A Closer Look on pages 1086–1087 about the Chinese American family. Do any details in this feature connect with details in Kingston's memoir? How do you think the story would have differed if the narrator had been a member of a different culture?

Extending and Evaluating

10. A character's motivation is what causes him or her to act the way he or she does. Motivation can come from needs, fears, and desires. What do you think is the motivation behind the narrator's wanting to make the silent girl speak? Do her feelings and actions strike you as believable? Give reasons for your evaluation based on your own experiences.