

Brandon Miller
Interpretation of Literature
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Interpreting a Minor Scene in a Major Way from The Woman Warrior

Every book one reads has major scenes that are absolutely essential to the story's progression. Just as books have major scenes, they also have minor scenes. At first glance, these minor scenes seem to serve little purpose, but upon closer inspection one may realize that these are the scenes that might in fact be more important than many of the major scenes. How can this be? Minor scenes can become more important than major scenes in books, because minor scenes are most conducive to reader interpretation. The interpretation and purpose of major scenes in books are very clear. Almost everyone interprets the scenes the same way. However, the interpretation of minor scenes is more elusive. If a book was full of only clear-cut, major scenes then everyone would come to the same interpretation of the story. This almost never happens. It is through the minor scenes that readers invoke their interpretation skills allowing them to apply their own feelings, experiences, and beliefs to the text. It becomes the task of the reader to interpret why the author included the minor scene; what major themes or issues does it reveal; and what does it disclose about the characters or perhaps more importantly, about the author?

Maxine Hong Kingston's book, called The Woman Warrior, is full of minor scenes that press readers to interpret their purpose. The book is actually Kingston's account of her youth as a Chinese-American woman growing up in California. It chronicles many of the events in Kingston's life and the stories she grew up hearing. One such important minor scene is found in the chapter called "Shaman." The whole chapter is surrounded by Kingston's account of her mother when she was living in China before

moving to America to be with her husband, who was already working in America earning money so he could send for her. Kingston's mother, named Brave Orchid, is described as a strong courageous woman, who was very smart. She had attended medical school in China, something that very few women are able to do there, and was now working as a midwife. Near the middle of this chapter, Kingston describes a minor scene in which her mother goes to the Canton market to shop for a new slave girl in celebration after receiving her diploma. The scene is no more than five pages long, but is a crucial part of the story because it calls for so much of the reader's interpretation and reveals a vast amount of information about the author and the mother as well as the cultural view of gender. The issue of gender is very important in this book and as is connected to almost every story the narrator tells. This scene, in a sense, shows a two-sided portrayal of the mother. On one hand, the mother is portrayed as an extremely successful and generous female, yet she is still unable to fight her traditional view of women being inferior that she grew up with. I believe the slave market scene in The Woman Warrior is one of the most important and revealing minor scenes because it divulges the Chinese view of females and slavery in contrast to American views and values, illustrates the mother's true personality, and foreshadows repressed feelings of the author.

Throughout The Woman Warrior as well as in this minor scene at the market, Kingston is continually introducing the Chinese cultural view of women contrasted to the American cultural view. She uses the contrast of cultures as an inner journey of self-discovery in order to come to terms with her own bicultural diversity, since she is a Chinese woman growing up in California. In this scene, Kingston introduces a number of cultural differences. The major cultural difference she introduces is that of the view on

slavery. In China, buying slaves is perfectly legal and an acceptable tradition. The twist on slavery in China comes in light of gender. All Chinese slaves are girls. Kingston and her mother always refer to the slaves as girls saying things like, “There were fathers and mothers selling their daughters” and “My mother would buy her slave from a professional whose little girls stood neatly in a row” (79). In China, boys are considered to be a sought after gift to the family and would never be thought of as ever being a slave. In contrast, according to America tradition, slaves were both male and female. In fact, usually slaves are stereotypically thought of as males working in the field, although of course there were many female slaves as well. Another important aspect of the American slavery system was the use of slaves from a different racial background, specifically African-Americans. The American notion of slavery always involves race. However, Chinese slaves were not only exclusively female, but were also of the same ethnic background as their masters. The issue of the Chinese tradition of slavery is important in this story, because it further illustrates the unimportance of women in China. The lines that come up often throughout the story are: “There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” and “When you raise girls, you’re raising children for strangers” (46). The theme of girls being unimportant runs strong throughout the book and can be aptly related to this scene dealing with female slavery in China. Kingston includes this scene because it shows the American readers of her book that injustice and segregation do not just take place between races, but also between genders.

This minor scene at the market reveals a vast amount dealing with gender through Kingston’s mother’s personality also. First, of course, the reader learns in the beginning of the chapter that her mother is very smart. This is apparent after reading about her

while she was in medical school. As the narrator says, “She quickly built a reputation for being brilliant, a natural scholar who could glance at a book once and know it” (63).

When the reader gets to the minor scene about buying the slave, he/she learns about the mother’s more dynamic traits. Most of these traits are not clear-cut and require quite a bit of interpretation. Kingston does not come out and say them directly like she did about her mother’s intelligence. Importantly also, all can be drawn back to relate to the predominate issue of gender.

The first trait the reader interprets is her mother’s upper-class status in China. This is interpreted through her ability to attend school and buy a slave. The reader learns that she is a rich woman in China because the narrator says, “My father did send money regularly, though, she had nobody to spend it on but herself” (60). This line leads to the reader’s understanding of how she was able to go to medical school and then later allows the reader to understand how she was able to buy her own slave at the market. From this scene, the reader learns that the mother’s status is clearly higher than most Chinese women’s. The positioning of this story is significant as well. By telling this story near the middle of the book, Kingston is able to show just how fortunate her mother was. Everything up to that point portrayed women as unimportant and lower-class. By telling this story in the middle of the book, she not only further characterizes her mother, but also introduces a hope for females to obtain upper-class status by showing that it can indeed exist and even has in her own family.

The second trait the reader interprets is her mother’s generosity and support of women. This is concluded after reading about what she buys at the market. The first thing she buys is a turtle for her father to lengthen his life (77). This is viewed as simply

a nice gesture. The second thing she buys is her slave. Under most circumstances, almost no one would interpret buying a slave as generous. Most would feel it is completely the opposite of generous because instead of giving, it is actually taking something away—the slave's life as a free person. However, this is not the case in this minor scene. Her mother buys the slave, so that the girl can be her nurse. As she says, "I am a doctor, and I shall train you to be my nurse" (81). By buying this slave, she is actually increasing the girl's opportunities. She is giving her a chance to actually be something, to have some self-worth—not just work as a slave in someone's kitchen. This shows just how much her mother supports women. She had grown up in a culture that said women were unimportant and useless, yet in this case, she has abolished that view and has went so far as to buy a female slave to train as her nurse. Thus, the reader interprets the mother to be generous as well as supportive of women after reading this scene.

The final trait the reader learns about the mother is how frugal she is. This also relates to gender, but more in the sense of gender equality. In China, most women were not trusted with money for two main reasons. First, women were viewed as a waste. They were raised to become property of another—either as a wife or a slave. Thus there was no justifiable reason to allow them to spend money since it would never generate any return. Second, women were stereotypically viewed as unintelligent wasters of money that did not have the capacity to make wise financial decisions. It is significant that her mother defies both these views of women, which gives the author hope for gender equality. Her mother, however, was indeed influenced by those views of women and thus became a more frugal person since she probably grew up unable to spend much of

her family's money. Her frugal tendency becomes apparent when she buys her slave girl. The narrator says, "Now it was time to act as if she were very dissatisfied with the slave's answers so that the dealer would not charge her extra for a skillful worker" (81). Her mother wanted to get a good slave at the lowest possible price. Near the end of this minor scene Kingston goes on speaking about her mother's frugal nature saying, "At department stores I angered my mother when I could not bargain without shame, poor people's shame. She stood in back of me and prodded and pinched, forcing me to translate her bargaining, word for word" (82). This further illustrates the mother's attitude about money. From these lines, the reader can further interpret that the mother probably came from a poor family and did not have much money growing up. Usually the most frugal people are not from rich families because they grew up being unable to afford many things, and hence learned the value of money better than the richer children. All these traits are inferred and are just possible ways readers might interpret Brave Orchid to be.

Perhaps, the most revealing information we learn from this minor scene is about the struggle with gender that Kingston, the daughter, faced. Despite all of the favorable traits that her mother has and all of the unfavorable views of gender that she has been able to overcome, her mother still has trouble dealing with her own view of women even in her own family. This becomes apparent when Kingston reveals her repressed feelings about her mother's lack of love for her. She says, "The unsold slaves must have watched with envy. I watch with envy. My mother's enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl" (82). Kingston had also had a brother and sister who had died before she was born, so she goes on saying, "Nor did I replace the older brother and sister who died while they

were still cuddly” (82). This shows that Kingston still has doubts as to whether her mother was able to completely overcome the views of women in the culture that she grew up in. Her mother looks at her as being just another girl—unimportant and unimpressive. Kingston is also clearly foreshadowing the climax in the last chapter in which she confronts her mother regarding the “true things about me” (197). This scene can be viewed as one of the first points in which the reader is allowed to experience the author’s feeling of being ashamed and unimportant to her family and specifically to her mother. It helps to justify the reader’s view of the final scenes when she finally confronts her mother as well as her mother’s beliefs about how her daughter should act and what she should do.

This scene also causes the readers to tend to sympathize with the daughter and not the mother. There is a feeling of betrayal when the reader hears that the mother has more enthusiasm for a slave instead of her own daughter. This scene reveals Kingston’s thought that she is the family outcast. This relates to another major plot running through the novel; how can she become a respected woman warrior for her family? What must she do as a woman to impress them? Later in the final chapter she says, “I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would be It at our house? Probably me” (189). This is just one of the scenes that cause her to feel like the crazy woman in her family. When the readers get to these lines later in the book, this minor scene in which they learned about the lack of enthusiasm for her from her mother creates one justification for those lines. Every person looks to his/her mother for support. If one grew up like Kingston without that support, one might feel like the crazy one in his/her own family as well just as she did—a woman that was ashamed,

unsupported, and unimportant. It becomes apparent that despite all of Kingston's mother's positive qualities, she has still been influenced by the culture she grew up in and thus has less respect for and belief in women's as well as her own daughter's abilities and potential.

Minor scenes are very important in all books, especially in The Woman Warrior. Minor scenes allow readers to interpret the story in their own way based on their own feelings, experiences, and beliefs. Throughout the book, gender is an extremely crucial issue that is addressed and this minor scene further reveals its underlying significance to Kingston. The slave market minor scene in The Woman Warrior is truly one of the most important and revealing scenes in that book because it divulges the Chinese view of females and slavery in contrast to American views and values, illustrates the mother's true personality, and foreshadows repressed feelings of the author.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. The Woman Warrior. New York: Random House, Inc., 1975.