An Essay on Relationships (Reading: “Two Kinds” by Amy Tan)

After seeing my mother's disappointed face again, something inside of me began to die.
—Amy Tan

What’s love got to do with it? What’s love but second hand emotion?
—Tina Turner

Our connections to other people in given contexts—at home, work, school, or out in the broader communities we live in—make up a big part of our experience, and, of course, they are fraught with both challenges and potential, with promise and problems. While people formally trained in psychology may have more sophisticated ways to analyze and describe the positives and negatives in a relationship, we’d all had experience with both sides from the day we’re born. This second essay asks you to call on that experience and move from the example of the relationship between the mother, Suyuen, and her daughter, Jing Mei, to consider a specific relationship problem closely. You might start by analyzing the interactions of the characters in the story, considering the language they use, how they seem to understand each other or misunderstand, and how their words or actions affect each other. Look also at the contexts the action occurs in and how that affects what they do or say—the cultural conflict created by the mother’s past and its traditions, the way the daughter is pulled toward being Americanized, the influence of popular culture, the pressure the daughter feels when she compares herself to her peers, and so on.

As you consider the problems that these two run into, think about what lesson or lessons readers can draw from their story: How should parents construe or think of their kids? How can people avoid the kind of misunderstandings and conflict that we see in the story? What are some better ways to respond to such problems? Also, while you’re writing/thinking about these issues, you’ll most likely think of other examples that you know of from experience or from seeing others go through conflict in relationships. You’re welcome to use these or some of these evaluate your ideas or to merely fill in the picture for your readers more clearly. For some writers, working personal or other examples may become the primary “showing” focus, though some might primarily us the examples from “Two Kinds.”

Process suggestions:
- Begin with a personal (informal) response, as we used for the first project
- Start the formal draft with an example so that you have something concrete to work with
- After all or most of the rough or exploratory draft is complete, look for an overall point about relationships or their problems. This could be in terms of what people should do or should avoid doing if they/we want relationships to be healthy and productive
- Watch for key terms in your writing, words like respect, understanding, anger, and think about what they mean beyond the obvious or surface meaning of the word. Respect, for instance, can mean different things in different contexts, as in Jing Mei respects her mother’s vision of Jing’s own future in the beginning, and feels as excited about her potential, but her failures, one might say, create at first a disrespect for herself, but that leads to an entirely different kind of self-respect after her epiphany.
- After you’re done with an initial draft, look at the final paragraphs to see if you can recognize a main lesson or central piece of advice about relationships and how to handle them effectively or about the damage that we can do with ineffective approaches. Think about or try taking this back to the introduction to provide an “umbrella” point that clearly sets up your purpose for the paper.
As always, I invite you to use whatever approach works best for you and to feel free to use your experience—the “I”—in the paper so that you end up with something that seems truly meaningful and worth having written.

Rough draft: 9/18 (due for section 42 on 9/16)
Final draft: 9/25 (due for section 42 on 9/30)