

In The American Society By Gish Jen

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Gish Jen Short Story In The American Society

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This essay explores the process of assimilating into the American society after a family moves to the USA from China in "In The American Society", by Gish Jen. It also explores the irony in the title of the piece.

"In The American Society", by Gish Jen, is a lurid portrayal of an Asian-American family who immigrated to the United States--addressing both the struggles and fortunes that America's opportunities have offered the family as they leave their old life in China. Now, the father must make something of himself and his family, in a time when America meant vast possibilities, but also being labeled as a foreigner. The mother in the story smugly declares, "But this is the U-S-of-A!" (542), proclaiming her pride in the opportunities accessible in her new home. Though, as the family begins to assimilate into the "American society", they find that while success brings them respect and affluence, it may not automatically make them fit into the new culture. The title itself is a direct inference to the transformation the family is forced to undergo.

The first half of the story is suitably entitled "His Own Society", describing the family's journey towards coming to terms with the American society. When the mother is thinking of joining the country club she states, "Your father doesn't believe in joining the American Society. He wants to have his own society" (542). This line echoes the ever-present theme in the story of assimilation, and the father's hesitation with adjustment. For people who come from cultures that are significantly different from the freethinking America, the process of acculturation can be awkward and even caustic. In the story, the father opens his own pancake house, and the family begins to encounter success. They then attempt to fit into their new society by buying a station wagon and recliner: typical American items. Throughout the rest of this first section of the story you see the actual internal core of "His own society": His work relations, friends, and family in both America and China. His Society works well for him--he's successful and happy.

The second half of the story's title is fitting as well: dubbed "The American Society"(548). This section is where you really see the heart wrenching depiction of the family's attempt to fit into their new society. A symbolic image found in the account, that most directly represents the family's integration into society is seen in the father's clothing. It explains that the father, "has no use for nice cloths, and would wear only ten-year-old shirts, with grease-spotted pants, to show how little he cared about what anyone thought" (542). Yet, later in the story, he finds himself wearing an expensive suit to a country club affair. This sudden change shows the father's eventual willingness to modify when left with no choice. Although at first he seems to blends in, one predicament sets off his insecurities and he launches his expensive jacket into the pool (550).

With this gesture, he seems to give up on The American Society and resort back to his...

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In the American Society by Gish Jen is a profound exploration of cultural identity, the immigrant experience, and the nuances of belonging in a rapidly changing landscape. This novel intricately weaves together the lives of its characters, highlighting the complexities of navigating two distinct worlds—one rooted in traditional values and the other in modern American life. Jen's narrative not only reflects the struggles of her characters but also resonates with broader themes of adaptation, acceptance, and the quest for self-definition amid societal expectations.

Understanding the Immigrant Experience

Gish Jen's narrative in *In the American Society* sheds light on the immigrant experience, delving into the challenges faced by individuals striving to carve out a place for themselves in a foreign culture.

The characters in the novel embody the various facets of this experience, portraying a rich tapestry of struggles and triumphs.

The Dual Identity Dilemma

One of the most significant themes in Jen's work is the concept of dual identity. Immigrants often grapple with the tension between their cultural heritage and the desire to assimilate into American society. This duality can manifest in various ways:

1. **Cultural Traditions:** Many characters strive to uphold the traditions of their homeland while adapting to American customs. This push and pull can lead to feelings of alienation, particularly among younger generations who may feel disconnected from their parents' values.
2. **Language Barriers:** Language plays a critical role in shaping identity. Characters who struggle with English often feel marginalized, which can exacerbate their sense of isolation. Conversely, those who master the language may find new opportunities but may also face the pressure to conform.
3. **Social Expectations:** The expectations placed on immigrants by their families and the broader society can create significant internal conflict. Characters often find themselves torn between the aspirations of their parents and their own dreams.

Family Dynamics and Generational Conflict

In *In the American Society*, Jen illustrates how immigrant families often experience generational

conflict, as traditional values clash with modern American ideals. Key aspects of this theme include:

- **Parental Expectations:** Immigrant parents frequently have high expectations for their children, desiring them to achieve success in a new environment. This can lead to pressure on children to excel academically and professionally, often at the expense of their personal desires.
- **Cultural Disconnect:** As children grow up in America, they may adopt different cultural norms than their parents, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. This disconnect can result in feelings of resentment from both sides.
- **Role Reversals:** Over time, some children take on the role of cultural mediators, guiding their parents through the complexities of American life. This role reversal can shift familial dynamics, creating a new understanding of identity and belonging.

Exploring Themes of Belonging and Acceptance

Jen's portrayal of the immigrant experience also delves into the themes of belonging and acceptance. The quest for acceptance is central to the characters' journeys, as they navigate the complexities of forming connections in a diverse society.

The Search for Community

Community serves as a vital lifeline for many characters in *In the American Society*. The search for belonging often leads individuals to seek out others who share similar backgrounds and experiences.

- **Cultural Organizations:** Many characters find solace in cultural organizations that celebrate their heritage. These groups provide support and foster a sense of belonging, allowing individuals to connect with their roots while adapting to their new environment.

- **Friendship Networks:** Friendships play a crucial role in providing emotional support. Characters often form bonds with others who understand their struggles, creating a sense of camaraderie that is essential for navigating the challenges of immigrant life.
- **Workplace Dynamics:** The workplace can also serve as a microcosm of society, where characters experience both acceptance and discrimination. The complexities of workplace relationships highlight the broader societal issues of race, ethnicity, and privilege.

Challenges of Acceptance

Despite the search for belonging, characters in Jen's narrative often encounter barriers to acceptance. Factors contributing to these challenges include:

- **Prejudice and Discrimination:** Characters frequently face prejudice from their peers, which can hinder their ability to integrate into American society. This discrimination can be overt or subtle, leaving lasting impacts on their self-esteem and sense of identity.
- **Internalized Racism:** The struggle for acceptance can lead to internalized racism, where characters internalize negative perceptions of their ethnicity. This can result in feelings of shame and alienation from their cultural identity.
- **The Quest for Authenticity:** Characters grapple with the desire to be seen as authentic in both their cultural heritage and their American identity. This quest often leads to self-exploration and a reevaluation of what it means to belong.

The Role of Humor and Resilience

Amid the struggles depicted in *In the American Society*, Gish Jen employs humor as a tool for resilience. The characters often use wit and humor to navigate their challenges, providing moments of

levity in an otherwise serious narrative.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

- Finding Joy in Adversity: Characters often find humor in their experiences, using it as a coping mechanism to deal with the absurdities of life as an immigrant. This humor serves to bridge cultural divides and fosters connections among characters.
- Cultural Humor: The blending of cultural humor can highlight the differences and similarities between immigrant experiences and mainstream American life. Through comedic moments, Jen illustrates how humor can serve as a unifying force.

The Power of Resilience

Resilience is a recurring theme in Jen's work, as characters embody the strength to overcome adversity. Key aspects of resilience in the narrative include:

1. Adaptability: Many characters demonstrate an incredible ability to adapt to new circumstances, showcasing the human capacity for growth and change.
2. Hope and Ambition: Despite facing challenges, characters maintain hope for a better future. Their ambitions drive them to pursue opportunities that allow them to redefine their identities.
3. Community Support: The support of community and family plays a critical role in fostering resilience. By leaning on one another, characters find strength in their shared experiences.

Conclusion: Reflections on Identity in American Society

In the American Society by Gish Jen is a poignant exploration of the immigrant experience and the quest for belonging in a complex cultural landscape. Through the lens of her characters, Jen highlights the challenges of navigating dual identities, the significance of community, and the power of resilience.

As readers engage with the narrative, they are invited to reflect on their own experiences of identity and belonging. The themes presented in Jen's work resonate far beyond the confines of the immigrant experience, prompting a broader conversation about the nature of American identity in an increasingly diverse society. Ultimately, Jen's novel serves as a reminder that the journey towards acceptance—both self-acceptance and societal acceptance—is an ongoing process, rich with challenges but also filled with hope and potential for growth.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'In the American Society' by Gish Jen?

The main themes include cultural identity, assimilation, the immigrant experience, and the complexities of American society through the lens of Asian American characters.

How does Gish Jen portray the struggles of immigrant families in the story?

Gish Jen illustrates the struggles of immigrant families by showcasing their challenges in adapting to American culture while trying to maintain their own traditions, highlighting the tension between heritage and the desire for acceptance.

What role does humor play in 'In the American Society'?

Humor serves as a vital tool in the narrative, helping to navigate the serious themes of cultural dislocation and identity while also providing moments of levity that connect characters and engage readers.

How does Gish Jen's writing style contribute to the story's impact?

Jen's writing style is characterized by its vivid imagery and sharp dialogue, which effectively capture the nuances of her characters' experiences and emotions, making their struggles relatable and poignant.

What insights does 'In the American Society' provide about the American Dream?

The story offers a nuanced perspective on the American Dream, suggesting that it can be both an attainable goal and an elusive ideal, reflecting the varied experiences of individuals from different backgrounds.

How do the characters' interactions reflect the complexities of cultural identity?

The characters' interactions reveal the layers of cultural identity as they navigate their personal beliefs, family expectations, and societal pressures, illustrating the multifaceted nature of belonging in a diverse society.

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