

Honors English 9
Summer Assignment

Throughout the Honors English 9 course, we will learn to “read like a writer” and develop our own voices in our writing. During the year, we will read a variety of mentor texts that will help us practice and develop analysis skills, as well as understand and emulate examples of effective writing. As we begin the year by reading narrative works and focusing on developing our own narrative writing style, we will read a selection of essays and a novella that will help us to identify specific writing skills and techniques.

- “Only Daughter” by Sandra Cisneros (essay attached)
- “Two Kinds” by Amy Tan (essay attached)
- “The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (speech attached)
- Selections from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (Students must purchase novel for use during class, ISBN: 9780679734772):
 - “The House on Mango Street” – pages 3-5
 - “Hairs” – pages 6-7
 - “Boys & Girls” – pages 8-9
 - “My Name” – pages 10-11
 - “Cathy Queen of Cats” – pages 12-13
 - “Our Good Day” – pages 14-16

As you read each of the works, pay attention to the following questions. There is no formal writing assignment due upon arrival in August, but we will use your notes and answers to these questions as the basis for a writing assignment shortly after you return to school:

1. Notice how the writer uses descriptive language in each of the essays. In what ways does the author utilize sensory imagery (details that relate to the five senses—taste, touch, smell, sight, sound)?
2. Notice the narrative voice. Take note of the language the writer uses. Do they use a lot of slang or formal language? Is their speech filled with emotion or are they more logical and detached? Identify mood and tone.
3. Consider the author’s purpose. What is the author trying to communicate to the reader through this piece of writing? What is the moral of the author’s story and/or what life lessons can be learned by reading?

Only Daughter

Sandra Cisneros

from *Latina: Women's Voices From the Borderlands*. Edited by Lillian Castillo-Speed. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Once, several years ago, when I was just starting out my writing career, I was asked to write my own contributor's note for an anthology¹ I was part of. I wrote: "I am the only daughter in a family of six sons. *That* explains everything."

Well, I've thought about that ever since, and yes, it explains a lot to me, but for the reader's sake I should have written: "I am the only daughter in a *Mexican* family of six sons." Or even: "I am the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother." Or: "I am the only daughter of a working-class family of nine." All of these had everything to do with who I am today.

I was/am the only daughter and *only* a daughter. Being an only daughter in a family of six sons forced me by circumstance to spend a lot of time by myself because my brothers felt it beneath them to play with a *girl* in public. But that aloneness, that loneliness, was good for a would-be writer—it allowed me time to think and think, to imagine, to read and prepare myself.

Being only a daughter for my father meant my destiny would lead me to become someone's wife. That's what he believed. But when I was in the fifth grade and shared my plans for college with him, I was sure he understood. I remember my father saying, "*Que bueno, mi'ha*, that's good." That meant a lot to me, especially since my brothers thought the idea hilarious. What I didn't realize was that my father thought college was good for girls—good for finding a husband. After four years in college and two more in graduate school, and still no husband, my father shakes his head even now and says I wasted all that education.

In retrospect², I'm lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands.

¹ **anthology**: collection of stories and other literature in a book.

² **retrospect**: thinking about things in the past

It meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually, right? This allowed me the liberty to putter about embroidering³ my little poems and stories without my father interrupting with so much as a "What's that you're writing?"

But the truth is, I wanted him to interrupt. I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as "My only daughter, the writer." Not as "This is only my daughter. She teaches." *Es maestra*—teacher. Not even *profesora*.

In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words, even though my father's only reading includes the brown-ink *Esto* sports magazines from Mexico City and the bloody *¡Alarma!* magazines that feature yet another sighting of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* on a tortilla or a wife's revenge on her philandering husband by bashing his skull in with a *molcajete* (a kitchen mortar⁴ made of volcanic rock). Or the *fotonovelas*, the little picture paperbacks with tragedy and trauma erupting from the characters' mouths in bubbles.

My father represents, then, the public majority. A public who is disinterested in reading, and yet one whom I am writing about and for, and privately trying to woo⁵.

When we were growing up in Chicago, we moved a lot because of my father. He suffered bouts of nostalgia⁶. Then we'd have to let go of our flat⁷, store the furniture with mother's relatives, load the station wagon with baggage and bologna sandwiches and head south. To Mexico City.

³ **embroidering**: adding details to

⁴ **mortar**: a very hard bowl in which things are ground into a fine powder

⁵ **woo**: attract, interest

⁶ **bouts of nostalgia**: short periods of time with homesickness

⁷ **flat**: apartment

We came back, of course. To yet another Chicago flat, another Chicago neighborhood, another Catholic school. Each time, my father would seek out the parish priest in order to get a tuition break⁸, and complain or boast: "I have seven sons."

He meant *siete hijos*, seven children, but he translated it as "sons." "I have seven sons." To anyone who would listen. The Sears Roebuck employee who sold us the washing machine. The short-order cook where my father ate his ham-and-eggs breakfasts. "I have seven sons." As if he deserved a medal from the state.

My papa. He didn't mean anything by that mistranslation, I'm sure. But somehow I could feel myself being erased. I'd tug my father's sleeve and whisper: "Not seven sons. Six! and *one daughter*."

When my oldest brother graduated from medical school, he fulfilled my father's dream that we study hard and use this—our heads, instead of this—our hands. Even now my father's hands are thick and yellow, stubbed by a history of hammer and nails and twine and coils⁹ and springs. "Use this," my father said, tapping his head, "and not this," showing us those hands. He always looked tired when he said it.

Wasn't college an investment? And hadn't I spent all those years in college? And if I didn't marry, what was it all for? Why would anyone go to college and then choose to be poor? Especially someone who had always been poor.

Last year, after ten years of writing professionally, the financial rewards¹⁰ started to trickle in. My second National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. A guest professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. My book, which sold to a major New York publishing house.

At Christmas, I flew home to Chicago. The house was throbbing¹¹, same as always: hot tamales and sweet tamales hissing in my mother's pressure cooker, and everybody—my mother, six brothers, wives, babies, aunts,

cousins—talking too loud and at the same time. Like in a Fellini¹² film, because that's just how we are.

I went upstairs to my father's room. One of my stories had just been translated into Spanish and published in an anthology of Chicano¹³ writing and I wanted to show it to him. Ever since he recovered from a stroke two years ago, my father likes to spend his leisure hours horizontally¹⁴. And that's how I found him, watching a Pedro Infante movie on Galavisión and eating rice pudding.

There was a glass filled with milk on the bedside table. There were several vials of pills and balled Kleenex. And on the floor, one black sock and a plastic urinal that I didn't want to look at but looked at anyway. Pedro Infante was about to burst into song, and my father was laughing.

I'm not sure if it was because my story was translated into Spanish, or because it was published in Mexico, or perhaps because the story dealt with Tepeyac, the *colonia* my father was raised in and the house he grew up in, but at any rate, my father punched the mute button on his remote control and read my story.

I sat on the bed next to my father and waited. He read it very slowly. As if he were reading each line over and over. He laughed at all the right places and read lines he liked out loud. He pointed and asked questions: "Is this So-and-so?" "Yes," I said. He kept reading.

When he was finally finished, after what seemed like hours, my father looked up and asked: "Where can we get more copies of this for the relatives?"

Of all the wonderful things that happened to me last year, that was the most wonderful.

⁸ **tuition break:** a decrease in the cost of going to a private school

⁹ **twines and coils:** strings and loops

¹⁰ **financial rewards:** money

¹¹ **throbbing:** beating

¹² **Fellini:** an Italian movie director

¹³ **Chicano:** Mexican-American

¹⁴ **horizontally:** laying down

Name: _____

Class: _____

Two Kinds

By Amy Tan

1989

*Amy Tan is an American writer whose works explore mother-daughter relationships and the Chinese-American experience. This vignette is an excerpt from her novel *The Joy Luck Club*. It recounts a young woman's memories of her difficult relationship with her mother.*

PLEASE NOTE: The following text contains an offensive term. Please review the text and consider how to address this directly with your students.

Note: *Although it is not mentioned in this story, it is clear in the novel *The Joy Luck Club* that the narrator's name is June.*

As you read, take notes on how pride plays a part in the lives of the narrator and her mother.

- [1] My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous.

"Of course, you can be a prodigy, too," my mother told me when I was nine. "You can be best anything. What does Auntie Lindo know? Her daughter, she is only best tricky."

America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.

We didn't immediately pick the right kind of prodigy. At first my mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple.¹ We'd watch Shirley's old movies on TV as though they were training films. My mother would poke my arm and say, "*Ni kan* — You watch." And I would see Shirley tapping her feet, or singing a sailor song, or pursing her lips into a very round O while saying "Oh, my goodness."

- [5] "*Ni kan*," said my mother as Shirley's eyes flooded with tears. "You already know how. Don't need talent for crying!"



"Untitled" by Jordan Whitfield is licensed under CC0.

1. a child star from the 1930s, famous for her singing and dancing, who began performing in movies at age three

Soon after my mother got this idea about Shirley Temple, she took me to a beauty training school in the Mission District ² and put me in the hands of a student who could barely hold the scissors without shaking. Instead of getting big fat curls, I emerged with an uneven mass of crinkly black fuzz. My mother dragged me off to the bathroom and tried to wet down my hair.

"You look like Negro Chinese," she lamented, as if I had done this on purpose.

The instructor of the beauty training school had to lop off these soggy clumps to make my hair even again. "Peter Pan ³ is very popular these days" the instructor assured my mother. I now had bad hair the length of a boy's; with straight-across bangs that hung at a slant two inches above my eyebrows. I liked the haircut, and it made me actually look forward to my future fame.

In fact, in the beginning I was just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so. I pictured this prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one on for size. I was a dainty ballerina girl standing by the curtain, waiting to hear the music that would send me floating on my tiptoes. I was like the Christ child lifted out of the straw manger, crying with holy indignity. ⁴ I was Cinderella stepping from her pumpkin carriage with sparkly cartoon music filling the air.

- [10] In all of my imaginings I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect: My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. ⁵ I would never feel the need to sulk for anything.

But sometimes the prodigy in me became impatient. "If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good," it warned. "And then you'll always be nothing."

* * *

Every night after dinner my mother and I would sit at the Formica topped kitchen table. She would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children that she read in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* or *Good Housekeeping*, *Reader's Digest*, or any of a dozen other magazines she kept in a pile in our bathroom. My mother got these magazines from people whose houses she cleaned. And since she cleaned many houses each week, we had a great assortment. She would look through them all, searching for stories about remarkable children.

The first night she brought out a story about a three-year-old boy who knew the capitals of all the states and even the most of the European countries. A teacher was quoted as saying that the little boy could also pronounce the names of the foreign cities correctly.

"What's the capital of Finland?" My mother asked me, looking at the story.

- [15] All I knew was the capital of California, because Sacramento was the name of the street we lived on in Chinatown. "Nairobi!" ⁶ I guessed, saying the most foreign word I could think of. She checked to see if that was

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2. a neighborhood of San Francisco, California
 3. a style of short haircut
 4. **Indignity** (*noun*) shame, embarrassment
 5. **Reproach** (*noun*) an expression of disapproval or disappointment

possibly one way to pronounce Helsinki before showing me the answer.

The tests got harder — multiplying numbers in my head, finding the queen of hearts in a deck of cards, trying to stand on my head without using my hands, predicting the daily temperatures in Los Angeles, New York, and London.

One night I had to look at a page from the Bible for three minutes and then report everything I could remember. “Now Jehoshaphat⁷ had riches and honor in abundance and... that’s all I remember, Ma,” I said.

And after seeing, once again, my mother’s disappointed face, something inside me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink, and I saw only my face staring back — and understood that it would always be this ordinary face — I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror.

And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me — because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so that I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts — or rather, thoughts filled with lots of won’ts. I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not.

[20] So now when my mother presented her tests, I performed listlessly, my head propped on one arm. I pretended to be bored. And I was. I got so bored that I started counting the bellows of the foghorns⁸ out on the bay while my mother drilled me in other areas. The sound was comforting and reminded me of the cow jumping over the moon. And the next day I played a game with myself, seeing if my mother would give up on me before eight bellows. After a while I usually counted only one, maybe two bellows at most. At last she was beginning to give up hope.

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Two or three months went by without any mention of my being a prodigy. And then one day my mother was watching the *Ed Sullivan Show*⁹ on TV. The TV was old and the sound kept shorting out. Every time my mother got halfway up from the sofa to adjust the set, the sound would go back on and Ed would be talking. As soon as she sat down, Ed would go silent again. She got up — the TV broke into loud piano music. She sat down — silence. Up and down, back and forth, quiet and loud. It was like a stiff, embraceless dance between her and the TV set. Finally, she stood by the set with her hand on the sound dial.

She seemed entranced by the music, a little frenzied piano piece with this mesmerizing¹⁰ quality, sort of quick passages and then teasing lilting ones before it returned to the quick playful parts.

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6. the capital city of Kenya, a country in Africa
 7. a king who appears in a story from the Bible
 8. loud alarms that ships make so they won’t hit each other when it’s too foggy to see
 9. a television variety show, popular in the 1950s and 1960s
 10. **Mesmerize** (*verb*) to hold someone’s attention; to charm or captivate

"Ni kan," my mother said, calling me over with hurried hand gestures. "Look here."

I could see why my mother was fascinated by the music. It was being pounded out by a little Chinese girl, about nine years old, with a Peter Pan haircut. The girl had the sauciness of Shirley Temple. She was proudly modest, like a proper Chinese Child. And she also did this fancy sweep of a curtsy, so that the fluffy skirt of her white dress cascaded slowly to the floor like the petals of a large carnation.

[25] In spite of these warning signs, I wasn't worried. Our family had no piano and we couldn't afford to buy one, let alone reams of sheet music and piano lessons. So I could be generous in my comments when my mother badmouthed the little girl on TV.

"Play note right, but doesn't sound good! No singing sound," complained my mother.

"What are you picking on her for?" I said carelessly. "She's pretty good. Maybe she's not the best, but she's trying hard." I knew almost immediately I would be sorry I said that.

"Just like you," she said. "Not the best. Because you not trying." She gave a little huff as she let go of the sound dial and sat down on the sofa.

The little Chinese girl sat down also, to play an encore of "Anitra's Tanz," by Grieg. I remember the song, because later on I had to learn how to play it.

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[30] Three days after watching the *Ed Sullivan Show* my mother told me what my schedule would be for piano lessons and piano practice. She had talked to Mr. Chong, who lived on the first floor of our apartment building. Mr. Chong was a retired piano teacher, and my mother had traded housecleaning services for weekly lessons and a piano for me to practice on every day, two hours a day, from four until six.

When my mother told me this, I felt as though I had been sent to hell. I whined, and then kicked my foot a little when I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV if you paid me a million dollars!" I cried.

My mother slapped me. "Who ask you be genius?" she shouted. "Only ask you be your best. For you sake. You think I want you be genius? Hnnh! What for! Who ask you!"

"So ungrateful," I heard her mutter in Chinese, "if she had as much talent as she has temper, she would be famous now."

[35] Mr. Chong, whom I secretly nicknamed Old Chong, was very strange, always tapping his fingers to the silent music of an invisible orchestra. He looked ancient in my eyes. He had lost most his hair on the top of his head, and he wore thick glasses and had eyes that always looked tired and sleepy. But he must have been younger than I thought, since he lived with his mother and was not yet married.

I met Old Lady Chong once, and that was enough. She had this peculiar smell, like a baby that had done something in its pants. And her fingers felt like a dead person's, like an old peach I once found in the back of the

refrigerator; the skin just slid off the meat when I picked it up.

I soon found out why Old Chong had retired from teaching piano. He was deaf. "Like Beethoven!"¹¹ he shouted to me: We're both listening only in our head!" And he would start to conduct his frantic silent sonatas.

Our lessons went like this. He would open the book and point to different things, explaining their purpose: "Key! Treble! Bass! No sharps or flats! So this is C major! Listen now and play after me!"

And then he would play the C scale¹² a few times, a simple chord,¹³ and then, as if inspired by an old unreachable itch, he would gradually add more notes and running trills and a pounding bass until the music was really something quite grand.

[40] I would play after him, the simple scale, the simple chord, and then I just played some nonsense that sounded like a cat running up and down on top of garbage cans. Old Chong would smile and applaud and then said, "Very good! But now you must learn to keep time!"

So that's how I discovered that Old Chong's eyes were too slow to keep up with the wrong notes I was playing. He went through the motions in half time. To help me keep rhythm, he stood behind me pushing down on my right shoulder for every beat. He balanced pennies on top of my wrists so I would keep them still as I slowly played scales and arpeggios. He had me curve my hand around an apple to keep that shape when playing chords. He marched stiffly to show me how to make each finger dance up and down, staccato,¹⁴ like an obedient little soldier.

He taught me all these things and that was how I also learned I could be lazy and get away with mistakes, lots of mistakes. If I hit the wrong notes because I hadn't practiced enough, I never corrected myself. I just kept playing in rhythm. And Old Chong kept conducting his own private reverie.¹⁵

So maybe I never really gave myself a fair chance. I did pick up the basics pretty quickly, and I might have become a good pianist at that young age. But I was so determined not to try, not to be anybody different, that I learned to play only the most ear-splitting preludes, the most discordant¹⁶ hymns.

Over the next year I practiced like this, dutifully in my own way. And then one day I heard my mother and her friend Lindo Jong both talking in a loud bragging tone of voice so others could hear. It was after church, and I was leaning against a brick wall wearing a dress with stiff white petticoats. Auntie Lindo's daughter, Waverly, who was about my age, was standing farther down the wall about five feet away. We had grown up together and shared all the closeness of two sisters, squabbling over crayons and dolls. In other words, for the most part, we hated each other. I thought she was snotty. Waverly Jong had gained a certain amount of fame as "Chinatown's Littlest Chinese Chess Champion."

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11. a famous German composer and pianist who continued to compose after he became deaf
 12. a set of musical notes played in an established order
 13. a group of musical notes played together
 14. a musical style where the notes are played quickly and sharply
 15. **Reverie** (*noun*) daydream
 16. **Discordant** (*adjective*) harsh-sounding

[45] "She bring home too many trophy," lamented Auntie Lindo that Sunday. "All day she play chess. All day I have no time do nothing but dust off her winnings." She threw a scolding look at Waverly, who pretended not to see her.

"You lucky you don't have this problem," said Auntie Lindo with a sigh to my mother.

And my mother squared her shoulders and bragged: "Our problem worser than yours. If we ask Jing-mei wash dish, she hear nothing but music. It's like you can't stop this natural talent."

And right then I was determined to put a stop to her foolish pride.

A few weeks later Old Chong and my mother conspired to have me play in a talent show which would be held in the church hall. By then my parents had saved up enough to buy me a secondhand piano, a black Wurlitzer spinet with a scarred bench. It was the showpiece of our living room.

[50] For the talent show I was to play a piece called "Pleading Child," from Schumann's Scenes from Childhood. It was a simple, moody piece that sounded more difficult than it was. I was supposed to memorize the whole thing, playing the repeat parts twice to make the piece sound longer. But I dawdled over it, playing a few bars and then cheating, looking up to see what notes followed. I never really listened to what I was playing. I daydreamed about being somewhere else, about being someone else.

The part I liked to practice best was the fancy curtsy: right foot out, touch the rose on the carpet with a pointed foot, sweep to the side, left leg bends, look up, and smile.

My parents invited all the couples from the Joy Luck Club¹⁷ to witness my debut. Auntie Lindo and Uncle Tin were there. Waverly and her two older brothers had also come. The first two rows were filled with children both younger and older than I was. The littlest ones got to go first. They recited simple nursery rhymes, squawked out tunes on miniature violins, twirled hula hoops in pink ballet tutus, and when they bowed or curtsied, the audience would sigh in unison, "Awww," and then clap enthusiastically.

When my turn came, I was very confident. I remember my childish excitement. It was as if I knew, without a doubt, that the prodigy side of me really did exist. I had no fear whatsoever, no nervousness. I remember thinking to myself, This is it! This is it! I looked out over the audience, at my mother's blank face, my father's yawn, Auntie Lindo's stiff-lipped smile, Waverly's sulky expression. I had on a white dress, layered with sheets of lace, and a pink bow in my Peter Pan haircut. As I sat down, I envisioned people jumping to their feet and Ed Sullivan rushing up to introduce me to everyone on TV.

And I started to play. Everything was so beautiful. I was so caught up in how lovely I looked that at first I didn't worry about how I would sound. So it was a surprise to me when I hit the first wrong note and I realized something didn't sound quite right. And then I hit another and another and another followed that. A chill started at the top of my head and began to trickle down. Yet I couldn't stop playing, as though my hands were bewitched. I kept thinking my fingers would adjust themselves back, like a train switching to the right track. I played this strange jumble through two repeats, the sour notes staying with me all the way to the end.

17. the social club June's parents belong to

[55] When I stood up, I discovered my legs were shaking. Maybe I had just been nervous, and the audience, like Old Chong, had seen me go through the right motions and had not heard anything wrong at all. I swept my right foot out, went down on my knee, looked up and smiled. The room was quiet, except for Old Chong, who was beaming and shouting, "Bravo! Bravo! Well done!" But then I saw my mother's face, her stricken face. The audience clapped weakly, and as I walked back to my chair, with my whole face quivering as I tried not to cry, I heard a little boy whisper loudly to his mother, "That was awful," and the mother whispered back, "Well, she certainly tried."

And now I realized how many people were in the audience — the whole world, it seemed. I was aware of eyes burning into my back. I felt the shame of my mother and father as they sat stiffly throughout the rest of the show.

We could have escaped during intermission. Pride and some strange sense of honor must have anchored my parents to their chairs. And so we watched it all. The eighteen-year-old boy with a fake moustache who did a magic show and juggled flaming hoops while riding a unicycle. The breasted girl with white makeup who sang an aria from *Madame Butterfly*¹⁸ and got an honorable mention. And the eleven-year-old boy who was first prize playing a tricky violin song that sounded like a busy bee.

After the show the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs, from the Joy Luck Club, came up to my mother and father.

"Lots of talented kids," Auntie Lindo said vaguely, smiling broadly.

[60] "That was somethin' else," said my father, and I wondered if he was referring to me in a humorous way, or whether he even remembered what I had done.

Waverly looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. "You aren't a genius like me," she said matter-of-factly. And if I hadn't felt so bad, I would have pulled her braids and punched her stomach.

But my mother's expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything. I felt the same way, and it seemed as if everybody were now coming up, like gawkers at the scene of an accident to see what parts were actually missing. When we got on the bus to go home, my father was humming the busy-bee tune and my mother was silent. I kept thinking she wanted to wait until we got home before shouting at me. But when my father unlocked the door to our apartment, my mother walked in and went up to the back, into the bedroom. No accusations, no blame. And in a way, I felt disappointed. I had been waiting for her to start shouting, so that I could shout back and cry and blame her for all my misery.

I had assumed my talent-show fiasco meant that I would never have to play the piano again. But two days later, after school, my mother came out of the kitchen and saw me watching TV.

"Four clock," she reminded me, as if it were any other day. I was stunned, as though she were asking me to go through the talent-show torture again. I planted myself more squarely in front of the TV.

[65] "Turn off TV," she called from the kitchen five minutes later.

18. a famous opera

I didn't budge. And then I decided, I didn't have to do what mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before, and look what happened. She was the stupid one.

She came out of the kitchen and stood in the arched entryway of the living room. "Four clock," she said once again, louder.

"I'm not going to play anymore," I said nonchalantly. "Why should I? I'm not a genius."

She walked over and stood in front of the TV. I saw her chest was heaving up and down in an angry way.

[70] "No!" I said, and I now felt stronger, as if my true self had finally emerged. So this was what had been inside me all along.

"No! I won't!" I screamed.

She yanked me by the arm, pulled me off the floor, snapped off the TV. She was frighteningly strong, half pulling, half carrying me toward the piano as I kicked the throw rugs under my feet. She lifted me up and onto the hard bench. I was sobbing by now, looking at her bitterly. Her chest was heaving even more and her mouth was open, smiling crazily as if she were pleased I was crying.

"You want me to be someone that I'm not!" I sobbed. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!"

"Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"

[75] "Then I wish I weren't your daughter, I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

"Too late to change this," my mother said shrilly.

And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. "Then I wish I'd never been born!" I shouted. "I wish I were dead! Like them."

It was as if I had said magic words. Alakazam! — and her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless.

* * *

It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn't get straight As. I didn't become class president. I didn't get into Stanford. I dropped out of college.

[80] For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could be only me.

And for all those years we never talked about the disaster at the recital or my terrible accusations afterward at

the piano bench. All that remained unchecked, like a betrayal that was now unspeakable. So I never found a way to ask her why she had hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable.¹⁹

And even worse, I never asked her about what frightened me the most: Why had she given up hope?

For after our struggle at the piano, she never mentioned my playing again. The lessons stopped. The lid to the piano was closed shutting out the dust, my misery, and her dreams.

So she surprised me. A few years ago she offered me the piano, for my thirtieth birthday. I had not played in all those years. I saw the offer as a sign of forgiveness, a tremendous burden removed.

[85] "Are you sure?" I asked shyly. "I mean, won't you and Dad miss it?"

"No, this your piano," she said firmly. "Always your piano. You only one can play."

"Well, I probably can't play anymore," I said. "It's been years."

"You pick up fast," my mother said, as if she knew this was certain. "You have natural talent. You could be a genius if you want to."

"No, I couldn't."

[90] "You just not trying," my mother said. And she was neither angry nor sad. She said it as if announcing a fact that could never be disproved. "Take it," she said.

But I didn't at first. It was enough that she had offered it to me. And after that, every time I saw it in my parents' living room, standing in front of the bay window, it made me feel proud, as if it were a shiny trophy that I had won back.

Last week I sent a tuner²⁰ over to my parent's apartment and had the piano reconditioned, for purely sentimental reasons. My mother had died a few months before and I had been getting things in order for my father a little bit at a time. I put the jewelry in special silk pouches. The sweaters she had knitted in yellow, pink, bright orange — all colors I hated — I put in moth-proof boxes. I found some old Chinese silk dresses, the kind with little slits up the sides. I rubbed the old silk against my skin, then wrapped them in tissue and decided to take them home with me.

After I had the piano tuned, I opened the lid and touched the keys. It sounded even richer than I remembered. Really, it was a very good piano. Inside the bench were the same exercise notes with handwritten scales, the same secondhand music books with their covers held together with yellow tape.

I opened up the Schumann book to the dark little piece I had played at the recital. It was on the left-hand page, "Pleading Child." It looked more difficult than I remembered. I played a few bars, surprised at how easily the

19. **Inevitable** (*adjective*) certain to happen; unavoidable

20. someone who adjusts a musical instrument so it plays well

notes came back to me.

- [95] And for the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side. It was called "Perfectly Contented." I tried to play this one as well. It had a lighter melody but with the same flowing rhythm and turned out to be quite easy. "Pleading Child" was shorter but slower; "Perfectly Contented" was longer but faster. And after I had played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song.

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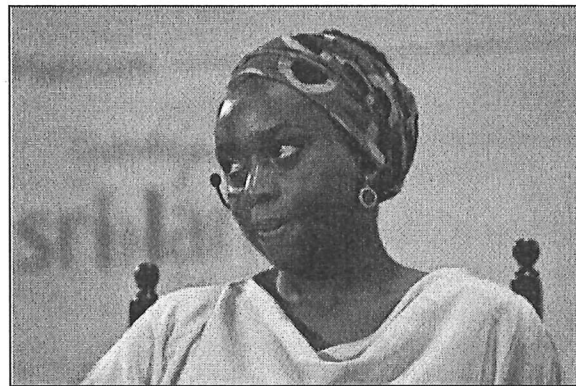
The Danger of a Single Story

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

2009

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, nonfiction writer, and short story writer. In this transcript from her TED talk, Adichie discusses her experiences with literature and the influence stories can have on constructing one's understanding of the world and its people. As you read, make note of the details that describe the impact that stories have on people.

[1] I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably close to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.



"Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at The Forum recording at the Galle Literary Festival" by BBC World Service is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, (Laughter) and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.

(Laughter)

Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

[5] My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer, because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.

(Laughter)

And for many years afterwards, I would have a desperate desire to taste ginger beer. But that is another story.

What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable¹ and vulnerable we are in the face of a story,

1. **Impressionable** (*adjective*) easily influenced because of a lack of ability or knowledge

particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books by their very nature had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify. Now, things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of them available, and they weren't quite as easy to find as the foreign books.

But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

- [10] Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

I come from a conventional,² middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic³ help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new houseboy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia⁴ that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey.

(Laughter)

- [15] She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing,⁵ well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

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2. **Conventional** (*adjective*) in accordance with what is generally expected or believed
 3. **Domestic** (*adjective*) relating to running a home or household
 4. a palm tree native to tropical Africa and Madagascar
 5. **Patronize** (*verb*) to treat with an apparent kindness that betrays a feeling of superiority

I must say that before I went to the U.S., I didn't consciously identify as African. But in the U.S., whenever Africa came up, people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. Although I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country, the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in "India, Africa and other countries."

(Laughter)

So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's response to me. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible⁶ people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family.

[20] This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok, who sailed to West Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as "beasts who have no houses," he writes, "They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts."

Now, I've laughed every time I've read this. And one must admire the imagination of John Lok. But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling,⁷ are "half devil, half child."

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story, as had a professor, who once told me that my novel was not "authentically African." Now, I was quite willing to contend that there were a number of things wrong with the novel, that it had failed in a number of places, but I had not quite imagined that it had failed at achieving something called African authenticity.⁸ In fact, I did not know what African authenticity was. The professor told me that my characters were too much like him, an educated and middle-class man. My characters drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore they were not authentically African.

But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing⁹ the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was

6. **Incomprehensible** (*adjective*) not able to be understood; not intelligible

7. author of the *Jungle Book*

8. **Authenticity** (*noun*) the quality of being genuine, real, or legitimate

9. **Fleece** (*verb*) to strip of money or property by fraud or extortion

overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject¹⁰ immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

- [25] So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is “nkali.” It’s a noun that loosely translates to “to be greater than another.” Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess¹¹ a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

I recently spoke at a university where a student told me that it was such a shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in my novel. I told him that I had just read a novel called *American Psycho* — (Laughter)— and that it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers.

(Laughter)

- [30] (Applause)

Now, obviously I said this in a fit of mild irritation.

(Laughter)

But it would never have occurred to me to think that just because I had read a novel in which a character was a serial killer that he was somehow representative of all Americans. This is not because I am a better person than that student, but because of America’s cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and Gaitskill. I did not have a single story of America.

When I learned, some years ago, that writers were expected to have had really unhappy childhoods to be successful, I began to think about how I could invent horrible things my parents had done to me.

- [35] (Laughter)

But the truth is that I had a very happy childhood, full of laughter and love, in a very close-knit family.

10. **Abject** (*adjective*) sunk to or existing in a low state or condition

11. **Dispossess** (*verb*) to deprive someone of land, property, or other possessions

But I also had grandfathers who died in refugee camps. My cousin Polle died because he could not get adequate healthcare. One of my closest friends, Okoloma, died in a plane crash because our fire trucks did not have water. I grew up under repressive military governments that devalued education, so that sometimes, my parents were not paid their salaries. And so, as a child, I saw jam disappear from the breakfast table, then margarine disappeared, then bread became too expensive, then milk became rationed.¹² And most of all, a kind of normalized political fear invaded our lives.

All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes,¹³ and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

[40] I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.

So what if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories."

What if my roommate knew about my Nigerian publisher, Muhtar Bakare, a remarkable man who left his job in a bank to follow his dream and start a publishing house? Now, the conventional wisdom was that Nigerians don't read literature. He disagreed. He felt that people who could read, would read, if you made literature affordable and available to them.

Shortly after he published my first novel, I went to a TV station in Lagos to do an interview, and a woman who worked there as a messenger came up to me and said, "I really liked your novel. I didn't like the ending. Now, you must write a sequel, and this is what will happen..."

(Laughter)

[45] And she went on to tell me what to write in the sequel. I was not only charmed, I was very moved. Here was a woman, part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers. She had not only read the book, but she had taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel.

12. **Ration** (*verb*) to allow each person to only have a certain amount

13. **Stereotypes** (*noun*) a common but often oversimplified idea about a group of people

Now, what if my roommate knew about my friend Funmi Iyanda, a fearless woman who hosts a TV show in Lagos, and is determined to tell the stories that we prefer to forget? What if my roommate knew about the heart procedure that was performed in the Lagos hospital last week? What if my roommate knew about contemporary Nigerian music, talented people singing in English and Pidgin, and Igbo and Yoruba and Ijo, mixing influences from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers?

What if my roommate knew about the female lawyer who recently went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband's consent before renewing their passports? What if my roommate knew about Nollywood,¹⁴ full of innovative¹⁵ people making films despite great technical odds, films so popular that they really are the best example of Nigerians consuming what they produce? What if my roommate knew about my wonderfully ambitious hair braider, who has just started her own business selling hair extensions? Or about the millions of other Nigerians who start businesses and sometimes fail, but continue to nurse ambition?

Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories.

My Nigerian publisher and I have just started a non-profit called Farafina Trust, and we have big dreams of building libraries and refurbishing¹⁶ libraries that already exist and providing books for state schools that don't have anything in their libraries, and also of organizing lots and lots of workshops, in reading and writing, for all the people who are eager to tell our many stories.

[50] Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign,¹⁷ but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

The American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the southern life that they had left behind. "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained."

I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

Thank you.

(Applause)

14. a term used to refer to the Nigerian film industry

15. **Innovative (adjective)** tending to introduce new ideas; original and creative in thinking

16. to renovate and redecorate something

17. **Malign (verb)** to speak about someone in a spitefully critical manner

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