"Words so Strong": Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" Introduces Students to the Power of Words

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A powerful story helps students to realize that words can order the world around us and form realities of their own.

It never fails. When I walk into the classroom, some students are alert and engaged, ready for class. Other students may be tired, having stayed out late the night before or pulled an all-nighter studying for a test. Still others may be indifferent and uninterested, English not being their favorite subject. In my hand, I hold a copy of “No Name Woman,” the often anthologized first section of Maxine Hong Kingston’s award-winning tale of adolescence, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1977). To my class of both engaged and disengaged listeners, I read the story’s first sentence, uttered by Maxine’s mother to her newly adolescent daughter: “You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you” (p. 3).

It never fails. At this moment, ears prick up and, no matter how tired, all eyes turn to me awaiting the rest of the story. After all, who does not like a good story, especially one so forbidden that it must be told in secrecy, with details so private that listeners must never repeat them? The rest of the story lives up to its dramatic opening. What follows is the harrowing tale of Maxine’s nameless aunt, her father’s sister, who invoked the wrath of her famine-ridden Chinese village by becoming pregnant outside of marriage.

According to Maxine’s mother, who claims to have lived with the aunt, “on the night the baby was to be born” (p. 3) the villagers descended on their farm, ransacking the fields and food stores, killing the livestock, and hiding behind “white masks” as they smeared the window panes with “red prints” (p. 4). Almost as a side note, Maxine’s mother mentions that the next morning she found the aunt and her new baby “plugging up the family well,” the aunt an apparent suicide (p. 5). The mother concludes her short narrative with an ominous warning for young Maxine:

Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful. (p. 5)

As storytelling, Kingston’s “No Name Woman” effectively captures students’ attention with vivid details and action. Just as important as holding students’ attention, though, is conveying to our students the power of words, and Kingston offers her readers an image of “words so strong” (p. 15) that they can kill and destroy or give life and resurrect. Maxine’s mother makes it clear that the aunt’s greatest punishment is not the raid but her “family’s deliberately forgetting her” (p. 16), denying her existence by refusing to speak her name. Bringing this aunt back to life in “No Name Woman,” Kingston offers an important lesson
about language, its powerful ability and equally potent inability to fix meaning, in this case to establish the facts of the aunt’s life. This is an important lesson for our students as they move toward a more mature understanding of words and their power. What follows is my attempt to capture the rich reading experiences that Kingston’s “No Name Woman” offers to students developing this understanding of words so strong.

Uncovering the power of words: Why teach “No Name Woman”?

Perhaps the most obvious reason to introduce Kingston’s “No Name Woman” to adolescent students stems from the story’s appeal to these readers. Kingston’s narrative explores classic themes of adolescence, from the search for meaning and truth; to the struggle between growing independence and the still strong influence of parents; and to the search for role models, both good and bad. Reflecting on her aunt’s story, an older Kingston tells readers that her mother always offered Maxine and her siblings stories that “ran like this one,” stories “to grow up on” that could warn her children “about life” (p. 5). If Kingston is correct, then her mother offers strange nourishment because, as Kingston tells her mother when she, the daughter, is older, “I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up” (p. 202). Indeed, in telling the aunt’s story, Kingston’s mother leaves out several important details about the aunt’s life, assuming that Maxine will supply these details or, more likely, that the details really do not matter. Maxine’s mother believes that she has told her daughter “once and for all the useful parts” (p. 6)—sex outside marriage is inherently dangerous and leads to shame, violence, and even death.

Maxine, though, does not accept her mother’s story without further reflection. So many facts are left out that the teenager feels compelled to make sense of the story, “to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (p. 5). Several of these unmentionables relate to the aunt and her pregnancy. What was this aunt like? Who was the baby’s father? What were the circumstances of the pregnancy? Maxine’s mother does not say; unable to ask about this deliberately forgotten aunt, Maxine must use imagination to fill in the gaps and create possible truths or storylines in the absence of an actual truth. Thus, at one moment Maxine casts her aunt as the victim of sexual assault, her attacker “not much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed” (p. 7). At another moment, Maxine imagines her aunt as the “lone romantic who gave up everything for sex,” who was “spoiled and mirror gazing” and enchanted at the “question-mark line” of her lover’s “long torso” (pp. 6, 8, 10). At still other times, Maxine envisions a “wild woman” who “kept rollicking company” (p. 8) and whose lover was as much the victim as the partner of her appetite. Finally, Maxine imagines neither romantic nor pursuer but a fiercely independent girl who “combed individuality into her bob” (p. 9) and for whom sex was merely a way to rebel against the rules her village had set for her.

There is no magic moment in “No Name Woman” when Maxine finally discovers the truth about her aunt, her aunt’s pregnancy, or the father of the baby. Maxine knows that if she wants more information, she must preface her questions with, “Remember Father’s drowned-in-the-well sister?” (p. 6). She also suspects that words are “so strong and fathers so frail” that the word aunt could cause her father “mysterious harm” (p. 15). Therefore, what emerges from the mother’s story and Maxine’s doubt is an adolescent’s struggle to make sense of her world through language, to fashion storylines that will give meaning to the aunt’s life and her own. Also inherent in this struggle is Maxine’s effort to define an identity independent from an influential mother who is the “champion talker” (p. 202); a silent father; and the unnamed aunt, an unusual role model who “haunts” Maxine and “waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute” (p. 16).
Because of its themes of adolescence, "No Name Woman" fulfills a fundamental tenet of education, that of drawing from students' own interests and experiences and, according to Bruner (1973), helping students to discover not "what is out there" but "what is in their own heads" (p. 72). Meaning and truth, relationships with parents, the desire for independence—these are issues that adolescents know intimately, and "No Name Woman" speaks to these experiences. Kingston's narrative gives students the opportunity to reflect on their own lives through the events of the story and to say, "let me stop and think about that" (Bruner, 1973, p. 72).

In a sense, then, "No Name Woman" satisfies Dewey's (1938/1959) demand that education be experiential, that there be "an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (p. 7). For Dewey, classroom experience must go beyond experiences of the "wrong kind," the endless drills and exercises devoid of context that destroy the love of learning (p. 15). Works like "No Name Woman" are more akin to the "quality" experiences that Dewey advocated and that draw from students' present life but "live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (pp. 16–17). For Dewey (1956/1990), this connection to life was critical if learning was to "nourish the spirit" and become "genuine and thorough, and yet a delight" (p. 178). The mystery and action of "No Name Woman" catch adolescent readers' attention. However, the story's themes of growing up will remain with these readers as they struggle with the same issues as Maxine.

To offer our students this chance for reflection is a goal worth pursuing. When reading is connected to students' lives, they enjoy the experience and become motivated to continue reading, to find their own lives reflected in pages of text. Burke (1999) pointed out that it is these moments when words offer us "clues" to ourselves and "life in the world" that are most memorable to budding readers and that create lifelong readers (p. 2). Nevertheless, as Dewey observed, just as important as encouraging a love of learning is ensuring the quality of these learning experiences. Kingston's "No Name Woman" meets Dewey's standards for quality not just because of its subject matter but precisely because of the ambiguity that Maxine faces as she searches for the truth. Specifically, "No Name Woman" introduces students to the critical notion that words are ambiguous and have the power to shape our lives in various ways. As Nelson (2001) suggested, teachers should instill this vital appreciation of words as "instruments of creation" (p. 57), an appreciation that fosters a deeper understanding of language's ability to create its own truths.

Of course, instilling this appreciation seems a fragile accomplishment at a time when more and more pressure exists to strip words of their creative power. The drills and exercises that Dewey criticized are not a thing of the past, and current research (McClaskey, 2001; Nelson, 2001; Thomas, 2001) has demonstrated the rising prevalence of—and concern with—standardized testing and the classroom drills it encourages. At their core, these tests are merely symptoms of a much broader, problematic attitude toward language. Specifically, these tests spring from the reductive belief that words can be isolated from context (Thomas, 2001). According to this view, each word has only one meaning or truth, which can be transmitted purely and perfectly and without ambiguity or doubt.

It is ironic that, for several decades, language research has been moving away from this reductive view of language (Bruner, 1986; Enos & Brown, 1994; Hruby, 2001; Leff, 1978; Scott, 1967). This trend is known by several names (epistemic, social epistemic, social constructionist, and the New Rhetorics), but what holds this approach to language together is the belief that ambiguity and the creation of alternate meanings spring naturally from words and the use of words. Hruby (2001), for example, outlined this trend from its beginnings in the early 20th century through Berger and Luckmann's (1966) influential text to the "postmodern turn" in
language studies, which contends that discourse “constructs knowledge” (pp. 52, 54). Hruby asserted that this knowledge does not exist before or beyond language but is “symbolically produced” through language and “confirmed by agreement” within a particular community (p. 52). Or, as Bruner (1986) noted, language “can never be neutral” and imposes a point of view in which the words or “message” may “create the reality that the message embodies” (pp. 121–122). Bruner and Hruby, moreover, are not alone in their beliefs about language.

We see traces of this attitude in current classroom practices and pedagogical theory, including in Nelson’s (2001) examples of language expressing “human need” (p. 61); Galda and Beach’s (2001) portrayal of literature as a cultural activity through which students “construct and critique their worlds” (p. 71); and Thomas’s (2001) belief that language itself is generative, “valuable for the journey, not for some concrete outcome” (p. 64). Pedagogical works such as these resist reductive notions of language and foreground the power of words so strong that they create the worlds we inhabit.

This is pretty heady stuff, but how can teachers help students to see words as instruments of creation? Many adolescents are not ready for heavy doses of readings by Bruner, Hruby, and other language scholars, and, frankly, not many students would be interested in these readings. Fortunately, contemporary authors like Kingston address these same issues of language and meaning through the much more accessible and intimate form of narrative. As the young Maxine discovers, words are indeed strong—ambiguous by nature, able to erase through their silence, but also able to generate multiple storylines for the unnamed aunt, brought back to life in an older Maxine’s text. Kingston’s narrative offers an excellent introduction to the idea that words shape our lives, important not only to language scholars but to any individual who uses language.

From the known to the unknown: Strategies for teaching

The notion that words can be ambiguous and construct meanings of their own can be baffling to students increasingly taught to the test and conditioned to believe that each word or question has only one meaning or answer. For this reason, students need careful guidance through a work as intricate as Kingston’s “No Name Woman” if they are to understand how language generates meaning in this text. For example, Kingston’s text divides into two sections: the mother’s 2- to 3-page narrative of the aunt, which can be read aloud to a class, and Kingston’s 12- to 13-page reflection on her mother’s narrative, which students can read on their own and discuss together as a class. In this second section, Kingston embellishes her mother’s short narrative, spinning off her own storylines and pondering her mother’s reasons for relating the aunt’s tragedy. It is in Kingston’s reflections that the reader glimpses the author’s preoccupation with language and its ability to create and destroy both symbolically and literally. Not content with simplicity, Kingston fashions reflections as complex and ambiguous as words themselves, her thoughts about language evolving as her text unfolds.

I have taught “No Name Woman” to my classes for almost five years and, because of the text’s complexity, I have found that an effective way to guide students through Kingston’s work is to move from the known to the unknown, relying on the simpler elements of the work and simpler responses to the text to illuminate Kingston’s more obscure points about language. Collected from my courses, what follows is a sequence of activities that moves from the known to the unknown in Kingston’s text. These strategies by no means cover the full range of interpretations of “No Name Woman” or the many ways to teach this text. Nevertheless, these strategies may offer ideas for incorporating this work—and its concerns with language—into the classroom.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR MAXINE HONG KINGSTON’S “NO NAME WOMAN”

1. You’ve just listened to or read the first two to three pages of “No Name Woman,” in which Maxine Hong Kingston’s mother tells her daughter the story of an unnamed aunt in China. What do you think of this story? What are your initial reactions?

2. In telling her story, Kingston’s mother offers very few details about Maxine’s aunt, the aunt’s pregnancy, or her death. First, what facts does Maxine’s mother include in her story? Second, what details does the mother leave out or omit? Finally, why do you think Maxine’s mother omits these details?

3. After hearing the story of her aunt, Kingston tries to fill in the gaps in her mother’s story. Kingston imagines what her aunt was like, how and why she got pregnant, who the father of the aunt’s baby could have been, and why the aunt killed herself and the baby. What possible personalities does Kingston imagine for her aunt and for the father of the baby? What reasons does she give for the aunt becoming pregnant? What reasons does Kingston give for the suicide and the death of the baby?

4. Kingston’s mother suggests that the family has forgotten the aunt because her pregnancy shamed and humiliated the family. However, Maxine offers another reason why her father refuses to speak of his sister. What is this reason?

5. Is it possible that the mother made up the story of the aunt? If so, why would she do this? Is it possible that Kingston herself made up the story? Why would Kingston do this?

6. “No Name Woman” is a story about language, words, and the search for meaning and truth. What is Kingston trying to tell her readers about language, words, and meaning? Kingston does not always come right out and state her beliefs about language. Therefore, how do the events in her text (the story of the aunt, Kingston’s reflections on this aunt) convey Kingston’s message about language?

(Discussion questions that complement the sequence of teaching strategies outlined here can be found in the Sidebar.)

What do you think? Students’ initial responses

The most immediate way to introduce “No Name Woman” is to read the mother’s narrative of the aunt to the class, a read-aloud experience that, according to Richardson (1994), too few secondary and postsecondary students enjoy after elementary school. After reading this terse narrative, teachers can hold off directed discussion of the story and instead ask students, “What do you think? Any reactions?” There are several reasons for beginning the discussion in this simple and unstructured way.

For instance, Cramer (1994) observed that “nearly every story lends itself to some sort of follow-up activities after reading,” the best activities being open, unstructured, and respectful of students’ ideas (p. 135). Cramer added that these activities should involve the entire class, a point echoed by Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) who asserted that reading is a “social phenomenon” (p. 149). Reading the aunt’s story out loud and then asking for reactions highlights the shared nature of language and allows students to rely on one another as they tackle Kingston’s text. However, Johns and VanLeirsburg (1994) stressed that just as important as sharing ideas is creating spaces for responding to texts that are “accepting, caring, and patient”; these nurturing spaces alone enable students to “learn the complexities of reading” (p. 101), and inviting unstructured responses to Kingston’s intricate work lays the foundation for more directed, involved discussions later.

In general, I have found students quite willing to respond to the mother’s short tale. Some express mild shock and even delight at the narrative’s somewhat lurid details. Others voice great interest and the desire to know more about the aunt and her baby. Other students reveal
confusion and bewilderment at the story’s lack of details about the aunt. Rarely does any student voice indifference. Positioning the aunt’s story at the very start of her book, Kingston meant for this narrative to provoke response, and it does. Fortunately, Kingston’s story also encourages audiences to read on and follow the author into her elaborate explorations of words so strong. Therefore, without discounting students’ initial responses, teachers can begin shifting discussion to these themes of language and its ability to construct meaning.

Highlighting the known: Students’ lives and the text

After listening to the mother’s narrative, students can read the rest of Kingston’s “No Name Woman” on their own, either during class or at home, and continue their conversation later in class or on the next day. Teachers can set up a discussion that emphasizes language by once again focusing on what students already know, in this case, about the use of words. For example, to encourage students to view Kingston’s text as important to their own lives, teachers might ask students to remember the many times that they have used words to create fantasy worlds, imagine possible futures, or practice upcoming conversations. Teachers might also ask for negative memories of language, the times when words quite literally caused pain or damaged a relationship. Finally, instructors might remind students of language’s ambiguity, the times when all writers, students included, cannot find the right words or when they try to write a poem, story, letter, or essay only to find that this text—so perfect in their minds—changes as they put pen to paper.

Kingston’s “No Name Woman” addresses similar issues of creation and meaning, and as long as students recognize Kingston’s connection to their lives, they will read on and reflect.

As intricate as they are, Kingston’s ideas concerning language are far from incomprehensible, and strategies exist for guiding students through Kingston’s work. For example, after establishing Kingston’s connection to their lives, students can engage with Kingston’s actual text by focusing on something substantial and concrete. Thus, when I teach “No Name Woman,” I ask students to list the few facts or details that the mother tells Maxine about her aunt. The students that I have taught typically come up with the following facts, which we outline at the front of class:

Facts/known (What facts does the mother give Maxine?)
- Maxine had an aunt, her father’s sister.
- The aunt became pregnant outside of marriage.
- The villagers attacked her house.
- She gave birth to a baby.
- The aunt and baby were found in the well.
- No one speaks of this aunt; she has been forgotten on purpose.

Although these facts will themselves be called into question as the discussion progresses, these details offer a good starting point for discussion, a way into Kingston’s mysterious narrative. Specifically, these facts provide touchstones for the story’s many unknown details, which hold the key to Kingston’s views on language and which I also ask students to list. When asked to name the unknown in the mother’s narrative, my students usually highlight the following details omitted by Maxine’s mother:

Unknown (What facts do we not know?)
- Who was the baby’s father?
- What were the circumstances of the pregnancy?
- What were the aunt’s motives for killing the baby?

To understand Kingston’s text, it is critical that students list the unknown in her narrative. The narrative’s facts, though, offer students something to hold onto before they start exploring the unknown. After outlining the facts in the mother’s story, students are better prepared to tackle...
the unknown in Kingston’s text, the details that young Maxine does not know but feels compelled to add to her mother’s story.

Exploring the unknown: Key to Kingston’s views on language

After the mother’s short narrative, Kingston’s text shifts almost exclusively to the author’s flights of fancy as the young Maxine fills the gaps in her aunt’s frightening history. At this point, students get a sense of Kingston’s ideas about the ambiguity and creative power of language as the author imagines her aunt as victim, romantic, wild woman, and independent rebel. Students can also explore with Kingston the circumstances of the aunt’s pregnancy and the baby’s father, whom Kingston imagines as attacker, lover, and finally pawn in the aunt’s struggle for independence. At this point in the discussion, students have moved far beyond the comfort of their own personal responses to Kingston or the facts that the mother provides. In particular, students now realize that Kingston will never satisfy the curiosity aroused by her mother’s narrative.

Instead of answers about the aunt, the aunt’s pregnancy, and the baby’s father, all that Kingston offers are more possibilities, more questions, more details that become increasingly obscure rather than clear. As a child, Maxine was not able to ask her mother or father for the details that would satisfy her own curiosity. As an adult, Kingston composes a text that offers this same disorienting experience to her readers. More often than not, our experiences of language are as bewildering as the young Maxine’s, and recognizing this ambiguity remains an important lesson for our students as they develop their own theories of language.

Moreover, this recognition of language’s ambiguity and power to create only intensifies as Kingston’s text unfolds and students follow the author through her narrative. For example, one thing that Maxine’s mother presents as fact to her daughter concerns the family’s denial of the aunt, their killing of her symbolically by refusing to talk about her. Thus, Maxine’s mother warns her daughter not to “tell anyone” (p. 3) that she has heard the story. After her narrative, the mother reiterates her warning and leaves her daughter and her daughter’s readers to assume that the father “denies” his sister because her pregnancy “humiliated” the family (p. 5). After students read Kingston’s full text, though, they notice that Kingston calls even this fact into question and explores other motives for the father’s denial. At one point, Kingston recalls another legend, this one that her father was “traded for a girl” (p. 11). Although returned to the family, this boy would eventually be supplanted by a younger “precious only daughter,” “unsually beloved” (p. 10) and valued more highly than her brother. In this way, the father’s denial of his sister becomes more than a matter of simple family shame. Now, the father’s silence stems from personal jealousy and revenge, and the chance to eliminate his rival masquerades as punishment for the sister’s dishonor. Once again, Kingston refuses to give readers definite details about the aunt’s life, and her refusal stresses her belief in language’s ultimate ambiguity.

With so much uncertainty, at this point in their discussion it seems fair for students and instructors to ask whether any of the aunt’s story is true. Could the mother have invented a nameless aunt to scare her teenage daughter away from sex and then concealed her deception by commanding her daughter to keep quiet? Young Maxine has no one to turn to for answers, and, unable to seek the truth, she must create her own truths. Toward the end of Woman Warrior, Maxine finally questions the aunt’s existence, but the many obscurities and twists in “No Name Woman” encourage Kingston’s readers to ask this question much sooner. This question, moreover, highlights language’s powerful ability to shape Kingston’s life. Real or not, the aunt’s story profoundly influences Kingston’s relations with her mother, her father, and men. Kingston’s mother succeeds. She creates a fear of sex and men in her daughter.
However, this “champion talker” (p. 202) also teaches her daughter and her daughter’s readers a lesson about language’s ability to shape reality. Indeed, savvy readers will ask whether Kingston herself made up the entire story. If so, then not just the mother but Kingston has an important message to convey about words. However, so startling is this message about language’s power to create something out of nothing that it is much wiser to start with the known in Kingston’s text before acknowledging how much Kingston leaves unknown in her narrative.

**The final twist: Making known the unknown**

Before ending their discussion of “No Name Woman,” students and instructors might benefit from analyzing one more episode in Kingston’s unusual text. Kingston’s final twist on language appears at the end of “No Name Woman” when the author imagines the death of the aunt and the aunt’s motives for killing her baby. Until this moment, Kingston has entertained several possibilities for her relative’s personality and pregnancy. Interestingly, this doubt or ambiguity disappears as Kingston fashions a “you are there” account of the aunt’s death. Of all the details in the story, the death of the aunt and her baby haunts most students. In my experience, although students sympathize with the aunt, they draw the line at sympathizing with her decision to take the baby with her when she commits suicide.

Kingston, however, casts the aunt’s actions in quite a different and unambiguous light. The author imagines a woman who kills her newborn “as a last act of responsibility” and asserts that “carrying the baby to the well shows loving” because “mothers who love their children take them along” (p. 15). Neither evil nor corruption but love drives this abandoned mother to kill her own child, who would also be abandoned by a village unwilling to accept the illegitimate offspring of a suicide. However, most compelling about this last scene in “No Name Woman” is that Kingston shifts from her usual ambiguity and offers no alternatives to her reading of the aunt’s motives. Here, Kingston presents responsibility and love as the true and only reasons for the baby’s death, an unusual move in a text dominated by shifting meanings.

Apparently, Kingston has one final message about language, that a particular meaning can become the only reality, tentative but powerful nonetheless. Throughout her text, Kingston has explored multiple versions of the truth and toyed with identifying herself with the aunt, a varied role model. So closely, though, does Kingston identify with the aunt’s suicide in this final scene that the identification is complete. Burke (1950/1969) would contend that Kingston and the aunt become so identified with one another in this scene that they are “consubstantial,” the same person (p. 21). Thus, at this moment, Kingston has no doubt of her relative’s motives, and through the language of her text, she becomes the aunt. She “knows” the aunt, and her thoughts and motives are the aunt’s. For this reason, Kingston’s final message about language is ironic. Words are ambiguous, but one version of the truth can be so powerful that this image emerges as the truth. Kingston is correct. Words are strong, and this final twist in her story imparts this message to her readers, especially to adolescents discovering language’s power to create reality.

**A challenging but rewarding text**

Introducing Kingston’s “No Name Woman” to a class of readers can be rewarding but intimidating. Kingston’s text is as intricate as language itself. Still, the author’s ideas about words reflect the experiences of anyone who uses language to make sense of the world. Creating class discussions that reveal Kingston’s complex thinking about language can be a challenge. Nevertheless, as difficult as these activities are, I have found that students approach “No Name Woman”
enthusiastically and with great interest. After all, our students are language users, and remembering her adolescence, Kingston speaks to the often bewildering experiences of young people ordering their world for perhaps the first time. Kingston demonstrates to these students that language critically influences this shaping of meaning and reality. Reflecting on Kingston’s experiences, our students will better understand their own encounters with words so strong.

REFERENCES