

Name

Professor Schmidt

ENGL 071D: Short Story in the U.S.

4 October 2013

### Fault Lines in Sin Far's "The Land of the Free"

In "The Land of the Free," Sui Sin Far shows steep contrasts between opposing forces. On one hand, there are the forces of family, culture, and tradition. These forces appear in the values Hom Hing and Lae Choo initially prioritize, such as their decision to have their son born in China. On the other hand, there are the forces of the law and mainstream social values. These influences appear in characters such as the customs officers and in the strict anti-immigration perspectives they perpetuate. Through techniques such as imagery, specific characterization, and ironic language, Sin Far exposes how these forces create tensions and ironies on each level of existence—the individual, familial, cultural, and societal level. As a result we discover not only the overwhelming tension between two markedly different identities, but also the dangers in adhering to one paradigm over the other.

One of the most significant forms of conflict between the two paradigms is internal tension. Nearly every character experiences some sort of tear between two identities—between one which exhibits natural, moral, or cultural ideals, and another that exemplifies institutionally-held values. Perhaps the clearest instance of this tension appears in the Little One. Too young to take an active role in shaping his own identity, he relies on the forces around him to form his outward self. In the beginning of the story, Sin Far characterizes the Little One as trusting and open to the world, a child who "look[s] up

into his mother's face in perfect faith" while "gurgling responsively" (3). His first dialogue, "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!" used to mock a steamboat (3), conveys a sense of wonder and even confidence in his own culture. He is receptive to the world around him and perhaps even mocks it as a way of establishing his relationship to it. By the end of the story, this nature is strikingly absent; the Little One exhibits a closed approach to the world, attempting to hide himself in his caretaker's skirt. His final dialogue spoken to his own mother, "Go 'way, go 'way!" (11) shows that the Little One is now closed to the world and experiences around him, a total reversal from his original faith and security in family and culture.

Lae Choo also experiences a shift between two identities over the course of the story. At first, Sin Far portrays Lae Choo as a traditional Chinese wife, to whom culture is so important that she goes to China to have her baby at her husband's request. Even as her son is taken away, Sin Far describes her as "accustomed to obedience" (5), showing that her behavior conforms to cultural norms of Chinese gender status. However, Sin Far creates tension between this identity and a more independent one; "No, you not take him; he my son too," she determinedly tells the customs officers (5), a statement which indicates equal power in possession of her child. Contrary to traditional Chinese views, this idea seems more similar to the American legal system, since the law often aims to set individuals on a level plane.

As the story progresses, Lae Choo develops this individualistic identity even further. The peak of her development occurs when she hires the lawyer James Clancy, whom she pays with her prized cultural possessions. She heaps her valuables in front of him, a symbolic action which displays willingness to sacrifice her culture. Although her husband

retrieves from the pile his gift to her, a ring, her near-release of the gift suggests her determination to sacrifice even her relationship with her husband—her strongest tie to traditional values—for her child. She trades her cultural past for a wavering present, and she symbolically forfeits present securities for an uncertain future in her son.

While Lae Choo draws towards a more proactive identity, Hom Hing transitions from a stable patriarch to a passive male figure who is helpless against the law. In Lae Choo's opening dialogue, Sin Far makes it clear that Hom Hing is the family's provider, since he "is making a fortune for [the Little One]" (3). He is also the source of authority, since Lae Choo went to China under his instructions. In his first appearance, Hom Hing's confidence in his family is apparent. "He is my son," he resolutely tells the customs officers, as his body language indicates carefree security in his role: he looks upon his child "with proud and joyous eyes," swinging his child and laughing (3-4). However, once his role as a protector is threatened by the law, his body language shifts towards anxiety and dejection. Hom Hing exhibits "apprehension in his eyes and in his tightening grip on his son," and speaks faltering English "slowly and solemnly" (4). This characterization of Hom Hing's speech not only implies an attempt to maintain control; it also implies forced self-control due to knowledge that the situation is slipping from his grasp.

From this point on, Sin Far also uses Hom Hing's movements to show his loss of familial control and attempts to regain it. Upon his first attempt to reclaim his son, we see his failure in a simple action: "his arms hung down by his side" (7). By the time we see him in one of his last scenes, Hom Hing is intently focused on his abacus in "his manipulation of the counting machine" (7). The word manipulation, indicative of full

control, becomes ironic in a situation where Hom Hing is helpless against the law; it emphasizes Hom Hing's failure to maintain his role as protector and perform his traditional duty. In this way, Hom Hing's original identity diminishes into a passive, almost emasculated form of existence brought on by present circumstances.

In addition to the identity struggles within the Chinese characters, Sin Far maintains the dual identity motif among her American characters. James Clancy is a particularly interesting example, as he seems split between his identity as a self-seeking "common white man" (9), enabled by American legal institutions, and an identity that entails a deeper sense of morality. When describing Clancy's interactions with Hom Hing, Sin Far uses adverbs such as "furtively," "solicitously," and "diplomatically" (8), indicative of a calculating, self-seeking approach. He shows a lack of concern for Hom Hing's case by casually lighting a cigarette, and then unabashedly confirms Lae Choo's accusations that he is indeed "a common white man" (9). However, he is "genuinely shocked" when he hears that Lae Choo's despair may lead to her death (8), revealing a humane quality contrary to his former self.

Clancy also experiences a significant moment of tension when Lae Choo offers her golden bracelet as payment. Although he first "mechanically" accepts it, when he recognizes his action, he insists, "Oh, look here, I can't accept this," and repeats the statement even after he learns the bracelet has true monetary value (10). In this case, it seems that Clancy hesitates to accept items of sentimental value. However, this tension does not shift his identity towards the moral. He afterwards "seize[s] the jewels, thrust[s] them into his coat pocket, and walk[s] rapidly away" (10); Sin Far's diction here connotes an almost violent decisiveness. With this simple yet complex interaction, Sin

Far gives us a sense that in the face of family values, even a lawyer, one of the law's chief representatives, feels a surge of humanity and feels torn between human morals and the cold stoicism of legality.

Lastly, the customs agents who interact with Hom Hing show a sense of ambivalence between upholding the law and promoting the just outcome. The officers seem to incline towards the sympathetic view at first; one says to the other "I don't like this part of the business," when they must take away Hom Hing's son (4). Sin Far even leaves us with a sense of ambiguity regarding the emotions of these officers; one says in simplistic English, "Very good, Hom Hing [...] Nevertheless, we take your son" (5). One interpretation of this line would suggest that the customs officers are priding their authority over foreigners by mocking their English, thus showing derision towards non-native citizens; however, another interpretation would suggest that the customs officers are sympathizing with Hom Hing by subconsciously mimicking his speech. Still, Sin Far gives us a sense of a confused identity for these characters, who as instruments of the law, feel a tendency towards the familial and humane but are unable to act upon it.

Among these characters, internal divisions vary in degree from individual to individual, each resulting from a situation beyond any one character's control; yet, such splits also appear in larger constructs. Another significant division in the story is the view of cultural preservation in America. It seems that the two extremes of assimilation and complete preservation pull culture in two directions; as a result, the attempts of immigrants to partially assimilate while maintaining traditional values gives birth to a pseudo-culture that contradicts both extremes. Throughout the story, Sin Far portrays this

by continually juxtaposing what constitutes surface displays of culture – artifacts and perceived cultural tendencies – and the culture itself.

For example, Sin Far's use of details reveals two versions of Chinese culture. The first is the neighborhood, customs, and language of Hom Hing's family and other Chinatown inhabitants. There are "completion of the moon" festivities, traditional trades such as gold embossing, and the spoken use of Chinese (6). At the same time, there is also the culture the American mission impresses on "Little Kim." Although the American nurses believe they are connecting the Little One to his culture by giving him an appropriate name, Kim is traditionally Korean. This demonstrates a homogenized American view of Asian culture that defaces the individual nationalities. Through such ideas, Sin Far indicates that there are two versions of culture: the sincere and the insincere, the 'natural' and the syndicated. This ultimately implies that the institutional side of America is incapable of preserving culture; thus immigrants who face the tension between total assimilation and cultural preservation may exhibit a version of their culture that contradicts both extremes, a culture neither genuine nor totally forsaken.

The contrast between the perceived possession of culture and the real inheritance also comes through in the sense of irony Sin Far creates surrounding the loss of culture. Although Hom Hing makes an effort to preserve his family's culture, his decision to have his son born in China ultimately becomes an obstacle, since it leads to his son being taken away by the customs officers. Moreover, despite the fact that Hom Hing's family lives in Chinatown, where Chinese culture exists in one compact area, being in America and interacting with American law still causes the couple to lose their culture, a loss epitomized by Lae Choo's total release of all of her authentic jewels and valuables. Sin

Far uses these instances to demonstrate that the approach to preserving culture is often a binary between total maintenance and total loss. However, attempts at preservation in the story result in the loss of true culture nonetheless; this loss gives rise to a culture that is caught between binaries, a surface representation of the true tradition.

Despite all of the seeming binaries in the story, it is possible to argue that there is a bigger picture—a reality that encompasses the inherited culture, the American-societal version of culture, and the total assimilation into American culture. With the image of “walking in a maze of anticipatory joy” (11), which appears as Lae Choo is retrieving her son, Sin Far suggests that, taken as a whole, the story is more complex. At first, a maze may simply suggest confusion and lack of foresight. However, in regards to an individual, a maze’s inherent structure compacts each decision into a binary, left or right. In the moment, the choice seems simple; many characters seem to only have to choose between their culture/values and the institutions of America. Even so, despite these binaries, there are infinitely many paths and permutations, resulting in an overall complex version of culture. While characters and their cultures must choose between binaries, each choice is one small influence in a future of choices, where their cultures and ideals are put to the test in a winding path; this forms a new version of culture that does not adhere to one paradigm or another.

Sin Far does not only use her characters to explore dualities. On another level, her story is about the cloven identity of America itself, or more specifically, the divide between nature and manmade institutions. Through motifs, conflicting beliefs, and irony, Sin Far highlights contradictions in the identity of America as a country and society. These overarching expressions of the division between the ‘natural’ and the

‘institutionalized’ indicate a confusion of identity due to the presence of two extremes, both of which America cannot simultaneously exemplify.

One such expression of America’s two identities is the juxtaposed motifs of nature and industrialization. In the beginning, the image of nature presents an idealized view of America: “See, Little One—the hills in the morning sun. There is thy home for years to come. It is very beautiful and thou wilt be very happy there” (3). In this opening dialogue, Lae Choo expresses the vision of America associated with nature: hope, the promise of a new beginning, beauty, and the possibility of the future. Yet, as mother and son draw closer to the shore, signs of industrialization become apparent: tugboats, steamers, and uniformed officials. Once symbols of institutionalized society are visible, the legal impositions also become an obstacle.

Similar contrasts occur later on, when Sin Far references each motif as an influence on Lae Choo’s emotional state. For example, when Lae Choo uses natural signs, the “bright streaks in the western sky” (6), as an indication of morning, she is full of hope of reclaiming her child. However, later in the day, when she “raise[s] her eyes to the gilded clock on the curiously carved mantelpiece” (7), a manmade indicator of the time of day, she experiences anxiety and bitter disappointment. Sin Far builds on nature’s symbolic quality with the detail that Lae Choo goes to China to give birth after dreaming of “a green tree with spreading branches and one beautiful red flower growing thereon” (4). Thus, nature expresses cultural forces rather than modern society, just as nature more aptly represents the traditional past and industrialization the progressive present.

Throughout the story, these mentions of nature fade into society-determined expressions, just as Lae Choo and Hom Hing’s sense of culture fades away into



desperation. While the narrator describes months as moons early in the story, near the end the narrator states that it was “ten months since the sun had ceased to shine for Lae Choo” (10). This shift to modern expressions and the depiction of Lae Choo’s emotional change as a loss of sunlight show a drawing-away from the natural view of the world, paralleling how America has drawn its inhabitants into institutionalized living. This, in turn, corresponds with each character drifting away from the hope of cultural preservation in America, relinquishing their true culture in the face of the overwhelming forces of society, legal restrictions, and industrialization.

Similar to America’s identity split between nature and technology, America itself comes to represent two different things for immigrants: the promise of freedom and obstacles to that freedom. The main source of conflict for Lae Choo and Hom Hing is not just their situation but their fall from optimism to disappointment as they attempt to raise a child in America. At first, they have faith in the American ideals of family and justice. They believe that they will be able to bring their son to America due to biological relation, mistakenly thinking the law will respect family bond. “There cannot be any law that would keep a child from its mother!” Hom Hing proclaims (6); yet, the story’s ending circumstances shatter this view, when their child is returned nearly a year later. Lae Choo’s attitude in greeting her son after ten months is remarkably positive, indicating a belief that culture and a connection to one’s family cannot be lost; yet, the Little One’s rejection of his own mother refutes this idea. Sin Far uses this conflict between optimistic belief and the reality of American life to demonstrate the tragic disappointment the characters face.

This disappointment ultimately highlights the irony of American ideals. For instance, Sin Far ends Part 1 with the ironic and bitter statement, “Thus the law of the land was complied with” (5). Yet the law was forced upon Hom Hing and his family, and the law was carried out without the willingness that such a general and authoritative statement implies. With this statement, Sin Far mocks the tone of authority that American law produces and emphasizes the inhumanity apparent in such an institution. The title, “The Land of the Free,” is also a prime example of this. It raises the question of who is actually free in America; it seems, according to Sin Far, that no one is. Hom Hing and his family are at the mercy of cruel and biased immigration laws, the customs officers are instruments of the laws they enforce, and even James Clancy remains a cog in the system, who, as an expert in law, perpetuates the cycle of injustice.

Although Sin Far uses opposition and binaries to show the complexities of culture, as well as the forces that shape culture on both a personal and societal level, what is perhaps most significant about Sin Far’s portrayal of these many binaries is the way they display fragmentation. In the end, the story is less about the existence of duality and more about the losses that result from the struggle—the fragmentation of individual identity, of culture, and of America’s values as a society. Caught in the maze of seeming choices between two extremes, the characters and America itself become lost in their attempts to uphold multiple and often contradictory ideals. Just like turns in a maze, a choice which might indicate a movement towards cultural preservation or freedom can ultimately lead in a different direction; this results in identities, cultures, and a country that pursue extremes, yet end up actualizing only one extreme or neither.

In theory, culture and identity should be able to encompass multiple influences while maintaining the integrity of each. However, in “The Land of the Free,” Sin Far shows that institutional law, which often deals in the binaries of ‘legal’ or ‘illegal,’ imposes binaries on the country and the entities it contains. Without room for an acknowledged in-between, the multiple identities that characters and institutions hope to maintain ultimately collapse in the triumph of one extreme at the expense of the other, or even in the failure of both. A commitment to survival in America overwhelms culture, just as a commitment to law overwhelms America’s ideals of freedom. Sin Far shows us that while the law seeks justice by imposing binaries on humanity, this view falls short of acknowledging the complexity of human existence, forcing choices that need not be and resulting in losses that transcend quantifiable values.

Works Cited

Sin Far, Sui. "In the Land of the Free." *Imagining America: Stories from the Promised Land, A Multicultural Anthology of American Fiction*. Revised Edition. Wesley Brown and Amy Ling, ed. New York: Persea Books, 2002. 3-11.