

Falling Leaves



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Genre Non-Fiction, Autobiography

Synopsis Born in 1937 in a port city a thousand miles north of Shanghai, Adeline Yen Mah was the youngest child of an affluent Chinese family who enjoyed rare privileges during a time of political and cultural upheaval. But wealth and position could not shield Adeline from a childhood of appalling emotional abuse at the hands of a cruel and manipulative Eurasian stepmother. Adeline struggled for independence as she moved from Hong Kong to England and eventually to the United States to become a physician and writer.

Themes Struggle for acceptance, Role of Environment

Protagonist Female, Chinese

Note Over the years, these books have been published in multiple editions. The page numbers in your book may be different than the ones on the lesson plan.

More Information www.scu.edu/character



Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 1



Key Paragraph, p. 3

“In order to explain our collective docility that afternoon, I have to go back to the very beginning. A Chinese proverb says that “lou ye gui gen” (falling leaves return to their roots) My roots were from a Shanghai family headed by my affluent father and his beautiful Eurasian wife, set against a background of treaty ports carved into foreign concessions, and the collision of East and West played out within and without of my very home” (p. 3).

Writing Prompt

Reread the key paragraph above. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe what this proverb mean. Explain how the key paragraph relates to the theme of Leadership Requires Engagement. Why do these adults seem so “docile” during the reading of this will, as their stepmother telling them their father was penniless?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 2



Key Paragraph, p. 24

“Towards the end there was a short period of lucidity. With father weeping at her side, she spoke to her parents-in-law and saw her children one by one, calling out each name with yearning. When Aunt Baba came in to say good-bye, mother was weak but clear-headed. She smiled at my aunt and asked for a hot dog. Then she added sadly, ‘I’ve run out of time. After I’m gone, please help look after our little friend here who will never know her mother’” (p. 24).

Writing Prompt

How does Mother show leadership when she says, “After I’m gone, please help look after our little friend here who will never know her mother.” **In an informative paragraph, explain mother’s behavior before her death. What is the significance in mother asking for a hot dog? How does mother view her death? Does she blame anyone? If you were mother would you be able to look at death the same way? Why or why not?**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 3



Key Paragraph, p. 41

“The funeral marked the end of an era. We did not know it, but carefree years of childhood were over” (p. 41).

Writing Prompt

Write an informative paragraph that shows how life will change after the Adeline’s grandma dies. How will Adeline’s child carefree days change? How did Adeline and her siblings feel about their grandma? What do you predict will happen now that grandma is no longer with the family? Will the family try to promote the common good of all the family members? Why or why not?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 4



Key Paragraph, p. 51

“‘We are going to teach you some facts of life...’ she paused. ‘We’re not saying we’ll not give you your tram fares. But we want each of you to come to us individually. Apologize for your past behavior. Admit that you’ve been spoiled. Turn over a new leaf. Come to us and beg for your tram fare is not a birthright. We’ll only give it if you show enough repentance’” (p. 51).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Adeline. **Write an informative letter that depicts Niang’s parenting techniques. Provide 2-3 examples from today’s reading, and address the following questions:** Does Niang choose to spend her time and effort to better her entire family? Why or why not? Why would she have the children, not her own, beg for money? Is this a sign a good parenting? Would you treat your children this way if you had enough money to give them the fare? Why or why not?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Macbeth, Day 5

**Key Paragraph, p. 74**

“I went under the covers but did not sleep. I could not bring myself even to think of surrendering. I soon heard Aunt Baba snoring gently. As the night wore on I became

more and more determined not to give in, no matter how cruel the torture. Defenseless and armed with nothing but my resolve, I knew only that I had to do it this way while hoping that Niang would possess no weapon powerful enough to vanquish me” (p. 74).

Writing Prompt

Write 1-2 informative paragraphs explaining how it is important to show leadership even during difficult and unjust circumstances. Include 2-3 examples of how Adeline still uses her time and talent to make her community better.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt ***Falling Leaves, Day 6***



Key Paragraph, p. 88

“She was profoundly moved when she heard Chairman Mao’s broadcast from Beijing on 1 October 1949, proclaiming the founding of the People’s Republic of China. All her fellow employees gathered around a radio to hear Mao announce, ‘The Chinese people have arisen’” (p. 88).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are a newspaper reporter. **Write an informative article of 2-3 paragraphs, explaining the changes in China's politics and economy. Include stories of how these changes are affecting the people of China.**

When answering the question above, consider the following: How will stores and shops change? How will jobs be affected? Is Mao the leader they needed? Why or why not?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt *Falling Leaves, Day 7*



Key Paragraph, p. 96

“In that case I think I’ll keep Adeline company.’ Victor climbed out of the Studebaker and stood by my side as the care drove away. I have never forgotten his Chivalry” (p. 96).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are a teacher at Adeline’s convent school. **Write an informative letter (2-3 paragraphs) to parents, explaining the changes the instability of the city due to the civil unrest and therefore the parents must pick up their children as soon as possible.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Falling Leaves, Day 8



Key Paragraph, p. 120

“It was a glittering occasion. Niang was dancing the night away in a green silk dress and matching jade earrings when she was urgently called to the telephone. It was Professor McFadden himself. He sounded tired and distressed. He said he felt duty-bound to give her the bad news himself. Franklin had suddenly taken a turn for the worse and had died” (p. 120).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Jeanne. **Write a eulogy (2-3 paragraphs) for Franklin’s death. In the eulogy explain the highlights of Franklin’s life. Include an explanation for his death.**

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 9



Key Paragraph, p. 127

“Consistently, I studied hard and gave my best effort. I dreamt of returning to Hong Kong with the highest academic honors and making a name for myself in my father’s city so that he would be proud of me” (p. 127).

Writing Prompt

Reread the key paragraph. **In an informative paragraph explain why is it so important for Adeline to prove her worthiness to her father? Include a second paragraph on how you can relate to Adeline (or not). When answering the question above, consider the following:**

- Do you think she will be able to make her father proud of her? Why or why not?
- How are Adeline’s choices an example of leadership requires engagement?
- Have you have worked this hard, in the hopes that someone would be proud of you?
- What did you have to do and who do you want to be proud of you?
- Why is this so important?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Falling Leaves, Day 10



Key Paragraph, p. 150

“I came to loathe their views expressed at those Sunday night dinners where I invariable remained silent, like a fish swimming in a cauldron and seething with frustrated discontent” (p. 150).

Writing Prompt

Reread the key paragraph. **In an explanatory paragraph, describe what Adeline means when she feels “like a fish swimming in a cauldron?”**

Why does Adeline keep going to those dinners that cause her to be frustrated? How are Adeline’s choices an example of leadership requires engagement? What is the most important thing to her even though she has never been accepted? Why does Adeline continue to gain her father’s acceptance? Would you work as hard as she did to win the acceptance of your parent?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 11



Key Paragraph, p. 166

“Towards our adorable baby, I lavished all my tenderness. I would rush home from work to bathe and feed him. I felt incredibly lucky to be able to give him all the love I had been deprived of during my own childhood.

Though the marriage was a complete sham, outwardly we gave the appearance of a nice wholesome Chinese-American family” (p. 166).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Adeline and **write an explanatory journal entry describing your marriage. Include a reflective paragraph on the future of this marriage.**

When answering the question above, consider the following:

- How Adeline met her husband?
- Describe their relationship.
- How does Bryon treat her?
- Living in a marriage that is a “sham” is that an example of leadership? Why or why not?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Falling Leaves, Day 12



Key Paragraph, p. 176

“The day after Christmas Byron was transferred to work in Oceanside. My lawyer served him with divorce papers before he left for Hong Kong again some time in 1971. He offered not to contest suit if I signed over my half-share of the Fountain Valley house and if I desisted from making demands for alimony or child support. I acquiesced immediately and moved out into another house. After the divorce, Byron neither wrote to nor saw his son again” (p. 176).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Adeline. Write a journal entry describing your divorce to Bryon. **Write an informative paragraph that explains why you wanted a divorce. When answering the question above, consider the following:**

- What do Byron’s actions say about his integrity?
- Did Bryon do the right thing for his family and for his son? Why or why not?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Falling Leaves, Day 13



Key Paragraph, p. 192

“‘We’re like prisoners over here,’ Louise would lament. ‘I feel as if I am in a straightjacket! I can’t breathe! Lets get away from her, James. I am willing to do anything, live anywhere. I don’t need very much.’

‘I know,’ James would reply, hanging his head and pouring himself another generous helping of whiskey, ‘but not yet’” (p. 192).

Writing Prompt

Write an informative paragraph explaining James decision to wait. When answering the question above, consider the following: Is James demonstrating leadership by staying in Hong Kong and satisfying Niang’s whims? To whom should James be true? Is this a sign of leadership and engagement? Why or why not? What is Louise willing to sacrifice to get away from the grips of Niang? Why?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 14



Key Paragraph, p. 204

“Aunt Baba wrote to father begging father to send Grand Aunt a regular allowance. Like everyone else she had been driven out of her penthouse home by the red guards in 1966. Her bank deposits were permanently frozen and non-transferable. Eking out of existence on the fifteen Yuan per month allowed by the government, she was often cold and hungry. After receiving Aunt Baba’s letter, father sent money to Grand Aunt regularly until she died from pneumonia three years later” (p. 204).

Writing Prompt

In an explanatory paragraph, describe how father and Aunt Baba are examples of leadership require engagement. Provide an example for each character. When answering the question above, consider the following:

- How does Aunt Baba engage to find a solution to a problem.
- How does father promote the common good?
- How do Aunt Baba and father make sure their family members are better because of their actions?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 15



Key Paragraph, p. 217

“The result of her rapprochement was her deliberate exclusion of Edgar. Later that year she held a gala seventieth birthday celebration party for my father in Hong Kong. Gregory and Matilda flew over from Canada with their two children. Bob and I attended with Roger and Ann. James, Louise and their brood were also there. Besides out immediate family, she also invited a dozen other guests. Edgar was never informed and only found out much later” (p. 217).

Writing Prompt

Write an explanatory paragraph describing Niang’s leadership.

When answering the question above, consider the following:

- Does Niang make good choices? Why or why not?
- Does Adeline show leadership by not telling Edgar? Why?
- What benefit does Adeline receive from Niang by being on her good side? When father passes do you think Niang will think of his children? Why or why not?
- Do you think she will reimburse Adeline for medical expenses? Why?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 16



Key Paragraph, p. 233

“Yes. Gregory phoned to ask if I would join him and Edgar in legal proceedings against Niang. He is afraid that Niang might remarry. I told him to forget it. I think at this moment Niang needs out moral support” (p. 233).

Writing Prompt

Write an informative paragraph that explains why Gregory and Edgar afraid that Niang would remarry? When answering the question above, consider the following:

- Are they concerned about their father?
- Does this show leadership requires engagement? Why or why not?
- Does Adeline show leadership or is she being naïve?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Falling Leaves, Day 17

**Key Paragraph, p. 243**

‘I suppose this is goodbye,’ I told Tai-way, feeling baffled and hurt. My nephew said nothing and gently hung up the phone.

This how Bob and I left St. Paul's after Tai-ling's wedding. Afterwards there was neither a letter nor a phone call from any of the Sungs to clarify matters. However, our bank statement that month revealed that the wedding cheque we gave Tai-ling had been cashed on the Monday following her Saturday wedding" (p. 243).

Writing Prompt

Write an explanatory paragraph informing Adeline why Tai-ling is rude to her. When answering the question above, consider the following:

- Why did the Sung family not tell Adeline anything?
- What is Adeline missing here?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 18



Key Paragraph, p. 250

"Gregory was unimpressed. 'No one twisted his arm. Obviously, he felt his chances of making it were better by throwing in his lot with Niang than going out on his own. Don't be sure of anyone's behavior where money's involved.'

'Near vermilion, one gets stained pink; near ink one gets stained black.' James has changed a lot over the years" (p. 250).

Writing Prompt

Reread the key paragraph. **Write an explanatory paragraph describing what Gregory means when he says, “‘Near vermilion, one gets stained pink; near ink one gets stained black.’ James has changed a lot over the years.” When answering the question above, consider the following:**

- How does it relate to this situation with Adeline, James and Gregory?
- Do you think Gregory is actually looking out for Adeline? Why?

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt
Falling Leaves, Day 19

**Key Paragraph, p. 260**

“Isn’t it incredible that Lydia, whom Niang hated and didn’t even want to see four years ago, receives 10 percent, whereas I, who bought the airline ticket for Lydia in 1986 so that the two of them could be reconciled, should be left out in the cold?”

‘That is how the Old Lady wanted it in the end,’ James said. ‘Who knows why? In any case, tomorrow morning everyone is invited to go up to her flat and divide up her furniture, antiques and jewelry. Give me a call if you’re coming. I really have to go now. See you tomorrow’” (p. 260).

Writing Prompt

Write three explanatory paragraphs to James, informing him how he *should* react. How could he demonstrate positive engagement and be an example of a good leader? Include one paragraph describing his betrayal to Adeline. In the second paragraph, describe what he should have done instead. In the final paragraph compare the outcome of acting in betrayal and acting as a leader.

Character Based Literacy Program Writing Prompt

Falling Leaves, Day 20



Key Paragraph, p. 274

“In her modest and unassuming way, she had guided me towards a spirit of independence, which she herself had manifested by rebuffing Niang and remaining in Shanghai. Aunt Baba was not one to dwell on the bitter hardships she suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Love, generosity, and humor never left her.

Life had come full circle. Falling leaves return to their roots. I felt a wave of repose, a peaceful serenity” (p. 274).

Writing Prompt

Pretend you are Adeline. **Write an informative letter to your siblings explaining the one thing you wanted from them. Include one paragraph of forgiveness and explain the type of family relationship you want to have with them in the future. Remember, Adeline is a leader who chooses to spend her time and effort to better her community.**

