

Fish Cheeks

Amy Tan

I fell in love with the minister's son the winter I turned fourteen. He was not Chinese, but as white as Mary in the manger. For Christmas I prayed for this blond-haired boy, Robert, and a slim new American nose.

When I found out that my parents had invited the minister's family over for Christmas Eve dinner, I cried. What would Robert think of our shabby Chinese Christmas? What would he think of our noisy Chinese relatives who lacked proper American manners? What terrible disappointment would he feel upon seeing not a roasted turkey and sweet potatoes but Chinese food? On Christmas Eve I saw that my mother had outdone herself in creating a strange menu. She was pulling black veins out of the backs of fleshy prawns. The kitchen was littered with appalling mounds of raw food: A slimy rock cod with bulging fish eyes that pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil. Tofu, which looked like stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges. A bowl soaking dried fungus back to life. A plate of squid, their backs crisscrossed with knife markings so they resembled bicycle tires.

And then they arrived -- the minister's family and all my relatives in a clamor of doorbells and crumpled Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence. Dinner threw me deeper into despair. My relatives licked the ends of their chopsticks and reached across the table, dipping them into the dozen or so plates of food. Robert and his family waited patiently for platters to be passed to them. My relatives murmured with pleasure when my mother brought out the whole steamed fish. Robert grimaced. Then my father poked his chopsticks just below the fish eye and plucked out the soft meat. "Amy, your favorite," he said, offering me the tender fish cheek. I wanted to disappear.

At the end of the meal, my father leaned back and belched loudly, thanking my mother for her fine cooking. "It's a polite Chinese custom to show you are satisfied," explained my father to our astonished guests. Robert was looking at his plate with a reddened face. The minister managed to muster up a quiet burp. I was stunned into silence for the rest of the night.

After everyone had gone, my mother said to me. "You want to be the same as American girls on the outside." She handed me an early gift. It was a miniskirt in beige tweed. "But in side you must always be Chinese. You must be proud you are different. Your only shame is to have shame."

And even though I didn't agree with her then, I knew that she understood how much I had suffered during the evening's dinner. It wasn't until many years later -- long after I had gotten over my crush on Robert -- that I was able to fully appreciate her lesson and the true purpose behind our particular menu. For Christmas Eve that year, she had chosen all my favorite foods.

Annotations and Essay Questions

Summary:

The autobiographical narrative, "Fish Cheeks," by Amy Tan, is about a fourteen-year-old girl named Amy who lives in America. The problem Amy experiences is that she is ashamed of her family. Amy wishes that she and her family were more American so she could fit in. She has a crush on a boy named Robert, and is terrified when she finds out that his family is invited to her Chinese Christmas Eve dinner. In the *beginning* of the story, Amy is embarrassed of her heritage, but she eventually realizes how her parents are trying to help her, and she ends up feeling proud to be Chinese.

Annotations:

- Circle the author's name and the story title.
- Underline the main character's name.
- Put a squiggly line underneath the story's setting.
- Highlight (or double-underline) transitional words and phrases.

Questions:

1. What is the writer's purpose? Who is the audience?
2. What are the writer's opinions about her family at the beginning of the essay? What evidence is used to support the writer's opinions?
3. Does the writer change her opinions about her family and her culture by the end of the essay? Provide two pieces of evidence to support your answer here.
4. What are some traditions that your family has? What are your feelings about those traditions?