

Name: _____ Class: _____

Fish Cheeks

By Amy Tan
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Amy Tan (born 1952) is an American writer whose work often reflects her own insight into the Chinese-American experience and mother-daughter relationships. While her parents emigrated from China, Tan herself was born in Oakland, California. As you read, take notes on how Tan's word choice and imagery contributes to her tone, and consider how the merging of these two cultures might affect a person's identity.

- [1] 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?



"Grilled Shio Koji Salmon Cheek" is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

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.¹ The kitchen was littered with appalling mounds of raw food: A slimy rock cod with bulging eyes that pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil. Tofu,² 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 clamor³ of doorbells and crumpled Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence.

- [5] Dinner threw me deeper into despair.⁴ 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.

1. A prawn is a common name, used particularly in the United Kingdom and Ireland, for large swimming crustaceans or shrimp.
 2. Tofu, also known as bean curd, is a food made by solidifying soy milk and then pressing the resulting curds into soft white blocks.
 3. **Clamor (noun):** loud and confusing noise
 4. **Despair (noun):** a complete lack of hope

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 down 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 inside 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.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What does the word “appalling” mean as it is used in paragraph 3? [RL.4]
- A. Delicious and appealing
 - B. Large and impressive
 - C. Hopeless and depressing
 - D. Awful or terrible

2. PART B: Which TWO phrases from paragraph 3 best support the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
- A. “my mother had outdone herself”
 - B. “littered”
 - C. “slimy rock cod with bulging eyes”
 - D. “pan of hot oil”
 - E. “back to life”
 - F. “plate of squid”

3. In paragraphs 2-6, how does Tan’s word choice and imagery reveal the narrator’s tone toward her family’s culture? Use at least two quotes from the text to support your answer. [RL.6] [RL.4]

4. Re-read the last paragraph of the story. What is the purpose of this paragraph? [RL.5]
- A. It presents the theme that family is more important than a romantic crush.
 - B. It reveals the narrator’s change in perspective and appreciation for her mother.
 - C. It shows the mother’s remorse for embarrassing her daughter in front of her crush.
 - D. It emphasizes the narrator’s different point of view from that of her family.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. How does the speaker's family act during dinner? How does the minister's family act during dinner? Why do they act so differently? Explain.
2. Explain the line, "Your only shame is to have shame."
3. The speaker's mother tells her daughter that it is okay to be the same as the American girls on the outside, but on the inside she "must always be Chinese." What do you think this means?
4. In the context of this text, what makes you who you are? Is it possible to change your identity? Should you try? Explain.