

“Fish Cheeks”

By Amy Tan

Directions: Read the following. Annotate your reading. Answer the questions that follow.

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 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 rumbled Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of my 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 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.

“Fish Cheeks” Analysis Questions:

Answer the following questions in your composition books. Use specific examples from the text.

1. What is Tan’s purpose in writing this vignette? What does she want her reader to understand?
2. How is this piece organized? (spatial, chronological, order of importance) Give evidence to prove this.
3. Where in the story does Tan give more details to slow the pacing? Give an example of and explain why this section was important?
4. What is the narrator’s tone? Explain why you believe this is the TONE. Give at least one example in your explanation.
5. In which paragraph does Tan use strong verbs most effectively? Why do you think so?
- 6.
7. What are the connotations of the words: white, American (nose), shabby, and noisy?
8. What similes and metaphors does Tan use? What are the purposes of the similes and metaphors used?