

Name: _____ Class: _____

Fish Cheeks

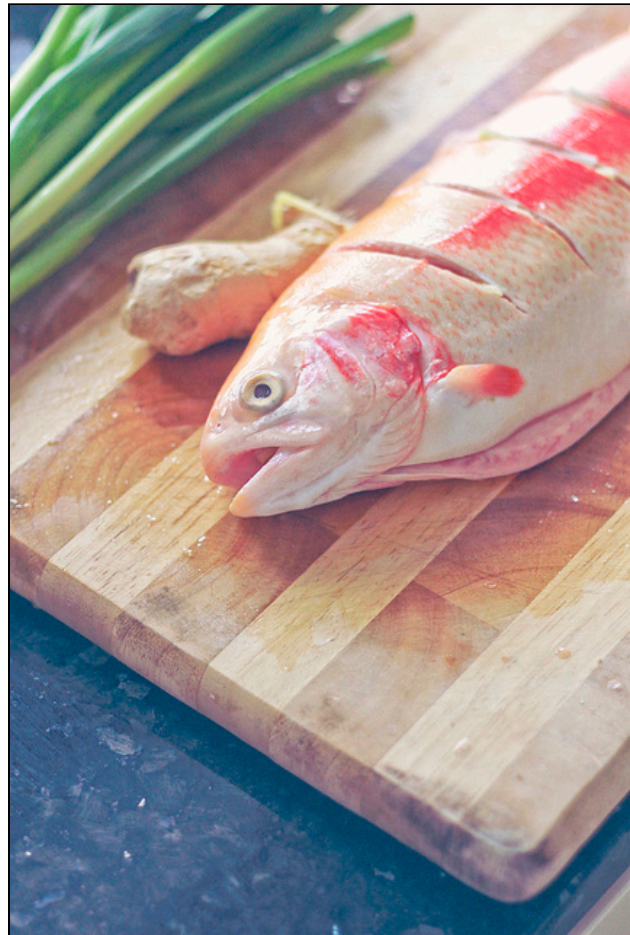
By Amy Tan
1987

Amy Tan (born 1952) is an American writer whose work often provides insight into the experiences of Chinese Americans and mother-daughter relationships. While her parents emigrated from China, Tan herself was born in Oakland, California. As you read, take notes on how the author's use of imagery contributes to the overall tone.

[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?

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 appalling² 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.



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And then they arrived — the minister's family and all my relatives in a clamor³ of doorbells and rumples Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence.

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1. A prawn is a common name, used particularly in the United Kingdom and Ireland, for large swimming crustaceans or shrimp.
 2. **Appalling** (*adjective*): causing shock, disgust, or alarm
 3. **Clamor** (*noun*): loud and confusing noise

[5] 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.

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Text-Dependent Questions

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

1. How does the narrator's description of the cod in paragraph 3 impact the tone of the passage? [RL.4]
 - A. She describes it as "slimy" and pathetic, which contributes to the angry tone of the passage.
 - B. She describes it as "slimy" with "bulging eyes," which contributes to the horrified tone of the passage.
 - C. She describes it as pleading with big "bulging eyes," which contributes to the pitying tone of the passage.
 - D. She describes it as pleading not to be cooked, which contributes to the mocking tone of the passage.

2. How does the narrator's point of view affect how the events are described in the passage? [RL.6]
 - A. She is nervous to have the boy she likes over for Christmas dinner, and so the text focuses entirely on the boy's reactions.
 - B. She is bored with her family's old Chinese traditions and wants to try new modern customs, and this affects how she focuses on being more "American."
 - C. She is excited to have the minister's son over for Christmas, and this excitement causes her to criticize every little detail of her mother's cooking.
 - D. She is embarrassed by her family's Chinese customs, and this shame influences how she describes the food and her family's behavior.

3. PART A: What does the word "despair" mean as used in paragraph 5? [RL.4]
 - A. shock
 - B. misery
 - C. frustration
 - D. disgust

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RL.1]
 - A. "Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "My relatives licked the ends of their chopsticks and reached across the table" (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "I was stunned into silence for the rest of the night." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "how much I had suffered during the evening's dinner" (Paragraph 8)

5. What does paragraph 8 reveal about the narrator's character development? [RL.3]
 - A. After the dinner, she realizes that the minister's son is not as friendly as she thought.
 - B. As an adult, she regrets trying to fit in with other Americans and losing her identity.
 - C. Years later, she learns to appreciate her family and her Chinese American identity.
 - D. Years later, she learns to love her mother's cooking, which she previously hated.

6. In paragraph 7, Amy's mother says to her, "You want to be the same as American girls on the outside... But inside you must always be Chinese." How does this quote contribute to the overall meaning of the story? [RL.6]
