

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 howl 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 their 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 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.

THE ELEMENTS OF NONFICTION

Title of Selection:

Author:

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| 1. What is the writer's purpose? Who is the audience? | |
| 2. Is the subject important or not? interesting or not? | |
| 3. What facts does the writer include about the subject? What sources are used? | |
| 4. What are the writer's opinions about the subject? What evidence is used to support the writer's opinions? | |
| 5. What is the writer's tone, or attitude, toward the subject? | |
| 6. Is every part of the essay necessary? How are the ideas presented? | |
| 7. Are the writer's ideas clearly presented? Is the diction clear? Does the writing contain jargon or other difficult kinds of words? any imagery? | |
| 8. What type of nonfiction piece is the selection? Is it autobiography or biography? | |

A Big Lesson

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.

At first, Amy wishes that she wasn't Chinese. To begin with, Amy wanted to go out with a blond American boy named Robert. However, Amy believes that he won't like her because her Chinese heritage makes her different. She also prays to have a slim, American nose because she thinks that this will help her to fit in.

Soon, Amy finds out that her parents had invited Robert's family over for her traditional, Chinese Christmas Eve dinner. Amy is mortified and even cries when she thinks of how Robert will react to her strange Chinese customs. When Amy walks in the kitchen to see her mother preparing strange food such as "fleshy prawns" and "tofu, which looked like stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges," Amy can't believe her eyes.

1. Circle the author's name and the story title.
2. Underline the main character's name.
3. Put a squiggly line underneath the story's setting.
4. Put a box around the summary statement - where the writer gives us background information about the story and its conflict.
5. Highlight (or double-underline) the thesis statement.
6. Spell "beginning" correctly in the space below.
7. What is the purpose of the introduction in the response to literature essay?
8. Underline the topic sentence.
9. Number the evidence 1, 2, 3.
10. Circle the transitional words and phrases.
11. Circle transitional words and phrases.
12. Put parentheses around words and phrases in this paragraph that describe how Amy *feels* about what's happening in this event.

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| <p>During dinner, Amy is very embarrassed. Her relatives reach over each other and grab the plates of food, while Robert's family sits politely waiting their turn. As her relatives lick their chopsticks and dig them back into the food, as Amy slinks down in her chair in astonishment. Amy's mother gives her a skirt at the end to make up for this. At the end of the meal, Amy's father belches loudly to show his appreciation towards the cook. Robert's father was able to force out a small burp to please him. Amy felt totally humiliated.</p> | <p>13. What character trait is being discussed in this paragraph?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>14. Underline the evidence from the text that shows us why Amy feels embarrassed.</p> <p>15. Write the transitional words and phrases that are being used.</p> <p>16. Cross out the sentence that is off-topic.</p> |
| <p>Although nothing could change what happened at dinner that evening, in the end, Amy's mother gives her two gifts that would eventually become significant to Amy. First, her mother gives her a beige American skirt. This helps Amy to see, years later, that her mother did understand Amy's yearning to be more American. Secondly, Amy's mother tells Amy that she can be an American on the outside, but she will always have to be Chinese at heart. Also, Amy's mother agrees to let her have plastic surgery to fix her nose in order to make it more "American-looking." It isn't until Amy grows older that she begins to understand her mother's love and lessons. After all, she had made all of her favorite foods for dinner.</p> | <p>17. Circle the transitional words in this paragraph.</p> <p>18. What does Amy's mother do that shows Amy that she understands her?</p> <p>19. Cross out the sentence that is NA (not accurate.)</p> <p>20. There are two vague pronouns in the last sentence of this paragraph. Cross them out and replace them so we know who is being referred to.</p> |
| <p>Even though in the beginning Amy is ashamed about being Chinese, she learns to appreciate her heritage. Throughout the story, Amy learns that even though her family may have a few strange points here and there, they still deserve her full respect. Although Amy never goes out with Robert, she realizes that changing who you are to impress others isn't really worth it. By the time she is an adult, she understands that everyone is unique and different. Amy may have wanted to look American, but she will always stay true to her Chinese heritage.</p> | <p>21. Highlight the restatement of the thesis.</p> <p>22. Underline the part where the writer summarizes the theme of the story.</p> <p>23. What is the purpose of the concluding paragraph?</p> <p>24. What is the purpose of a response to literature essay?</p> |