

Explore the BIG Question

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 appalling¹ 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,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 rumples

Set a Purpose for Reading

Read "Fish Cheeks" to see who Amy Tan learns to count on.


BQ BIG Question

Why is Amy nervous about counting on her family?

1 **Appalling** means "shocking" or "horrifying."

2 **Tofu** (tō' fōō) is a protein-rich food made from soybeans and used in soups, salads, and stir fries.

3 A **clamor** is a loud, continuous noise.



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.⁴ 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

⁴ Robert *grimaced*, or twisted his face, showing his displeasure.

BQ **BIG Question**

What do you think of Amy's reactions to her relatives?

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. 🐟



*Asian Woman with Hair
Comb. Todd Davidson.
[View the Art](#)*

BQ **BIG Question**

In what way is Amy's mother supportive of her?

BQ **BIG Question**

Whom has Amy learned to count on?

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

1. Use your own words to describe the most important events of the Tans' Christmas Eve dinner. [Summarize]
2. Why is Amy so upset about entertaining Robert's family? Explain. [Interpret]
3. Compare your family's holiday traditions with Amy Tan's. What foods does your family prepare, and what traditions do you follow? [Compare]
4. In addition to the miniskirt, what gift does Amy's mother give Amy? Explain. [Analyze]

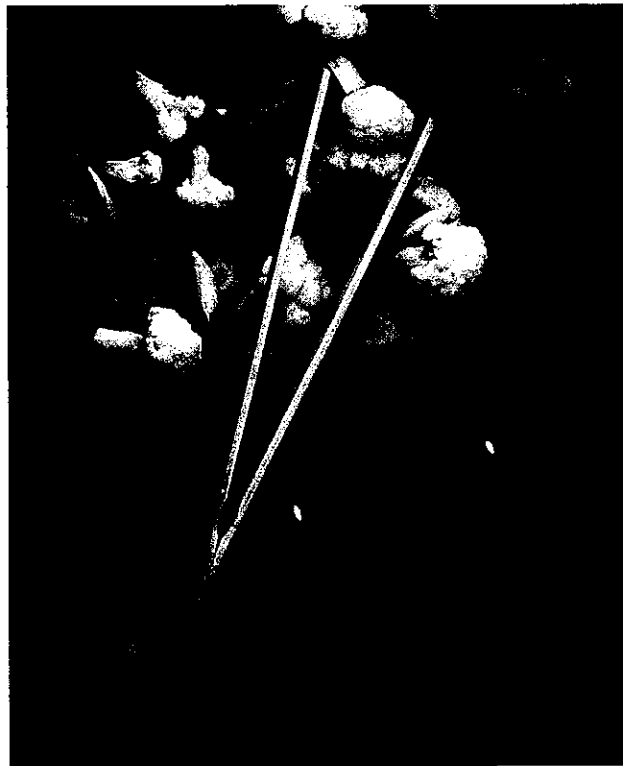


Writing

Write a Summary Write a one-paragraph summary about the selection. You may want to begin your summary with this topic sentence:

Amy Tan was embarrassed when _____.

In your summary, use your own words to explain the story's main ideas and important details. Your summary should also tell what you think is the meaning of the story.



Learning Objectives

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In this assignment, you will focus on the following objective:

Writing: Writing a summary.

LOG
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Literature Online

Unit Resources For additional skills practice, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL29763u1.