

“Fish Cheeks”

By Amy Tan

Terms to know:

- **Characterization:** the process by which an author reveals and develops the **personalities, traits, and qualities** of characters in a story. It involves describing the characters' **physical appearance, thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and interactions** to make them come to life and feel real to the reader.
- **Imagery:** the author's use of **descriptive language** to **create vivid sensory experiences** for the reader. It appeals to the five senses—**sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch**—helping to paint a picture in the reader's mind and evoke emotions.
- **Simile:** a figure of speech that **compares two unlike things** using the words **"like" or "as."**
- **Metaphor:** a figure of speech that directly compares two unlike things **without using "like" or "as."** Instead, it states that one thing is another, **implying a deeper, symbolic connection** between them.
- **Personification:** when **human** qualities, characteristics, or actions are **attributed to non-human entities**, such as animals, objects, or abstract concepts.
- **Hyperbole:** the use of **extreme exaggeration** to emphasize a point or create **a strong impression**. It is not meant to be taken literally; instead, it is used for **dramatic effect** or to convey **strong emotions**.
- **Symbolism:** an **image** that represents something **beyond the literal meaning**. It is an object, often ordinary and commonplace, that has been imbued with extraordinary significance.

Author Bio

Amy Tan is an American author best known for her novels exploring the complexities of mother-daughter relationships and the Chinese-American experience. Born on February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California, to Chinese immigrant parents, Tan faced several personal tragedies early in life, including the death of her father and older brother from brain tumors within a year of each other. These events deeply influenced her writing, particularly her focus on themes of family and cultural identity.

Background/Historical Information:

Tan's writing is known for its lyrical prose, intricate storytelling, and exploration of the interplay between cultural heritage and personal identity. Her works often draw from her own experiences and the stories of her family, particularly her relationship with her mother. "Fish Cheeks" is a short autobiographical essay by Amy Tan, originally published in 1987 in *Seventeen* magazine.



Part 1: Reading and Annotating

Directions: With your group, assign a recorder to each color in the highlighting key. Each recorder will be responsible for a specific focus area. In the right-hand column, write the label and explanation for each annotation. Annotate the text for the following elements: characterization, imagery, figurative language (such as simile, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole), symbolism, and theme.

Highlighting Key			
Blue: Characterization Recorder:	Yellow: Figurative Language Recorder:	Green: Imagery Recorder:	Pink: Symbolism Recorder:

Amy Tan’s “Fish Cheeks”		Annotations
<p>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.</p> <p>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?</p>		
<p>Stop Active Reading Question: Why does Tan cry when she finds out that the boy she is in love with is coming to dinner?</p> <p>Answer:</p>		
<p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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,</p>		

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.

Stop Active Reading Question: How does the fourteen-year-old Tan feel about her Chinese background?

Answer:

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.

Stop Active Reading Question: Why does Tan's mother go out of her way to prepare a traditional Chinese dinner for her daughter and guests? What one sentence from the text best sums up the lesson Tan was not able to understand until years later?

Answer:

Part 2: Analysis and Writing Practice

Directions: Assign recorders for each question. Then, discuss each question as a group while the recorder types out the group's response. The answers must be written in complete sentences.

1. What is Tan's PURPOSE in writing this essay? Does she just want to entertain readers, or might she have a weightier goal?

Recorder:

Type Here:

2. How does Amy Tan characterize her younger self and her mother? What are they like and how does she reveal these traits to us?

Recorder:

Type Here:

3. Pick one figurative device (simile, metaphor, hyperbole, personification) and determine its purpose.

Recorder:	Type Here:
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Writing

Directions: Answer the following prompt by creating a strong [claim](#) that responds to the prompt below. Remember, a strong claim has a *Topic* + *Verb* + *Argument* + *So What?*

Recorder:	Prompt: What significant message about identity does Amy Tan communicate through the symbol of food?
	Type Here: