Amy Tan’s “Fish Cheeks” Talking Points

* How does Amy Tan establish context at the beginning of the story?

P1 introduces her age and the conflict of cultures via her crush; reinforces this as an identity conflict with “a slim new American nose”

* Tan chooses to use several questions to develop P2. What effect does this have?

Takes the reader into (imitates) the reeling mind of a 14 year old - terrified and embarrassed. Only questions … no answers.

* Par 3 is full of imagery. How does Tan’s diction (word choice) influence the tone and purpose of this paragraph?

“Fleshy”, “pleaded” “slimy” “rubbery”- she’s embarrassed and is seeing/describing her family’s food through a foreigner’s eyes. The words used emphasize the unappealing sight.

* Par 4 is only two sentences long. Why might Tan have chosen to make it so short?

It serves only as a transition. The two paragraphs flanking it (food prep and table discussion) are much more

important to the crisis at hand.

* Why might Tan choose to use dialogue where she does and NOT include every word that was spoken at dinner?

Tan uses dialogue for only Tan’s father and the mother at critical points in the story. Her father (in P5) simply says “Amy, your favorite” - those words pierce her as she is already mortified and now her dad points out something that drives the knife in deeper. It serves as the climax of her embarrassment and is more powerfully illustrated with the simple dialogue.

Tan also chooses to use dialogue with her mother in P 7. This is a moment that reveals her mother’s awareness of the identity conflict introduced in P1. Her words are spoken in love and reveal Tan’s moral to the story.

* What serves as the climax (or most embarrassing moment) of the meal? How does Tan write it in a way that builds up this moment?

Father pointing out that her favorite food was the Fish Cheek. Dialogue had not been used yet in story. He (out of love) offers her her favorite part of the fish. The paragraph ends with a simple and direct sentence - “I wanted to disappear.”

* Why does Tan include P7? Why doesn’t she just stop it as a story about her embarrassing meal? What does P 7 really reveal to the reader?

Mother understood the conflict that Amy experienced. Makes it more about her own identity crisis (as introduced in P1) than just about her embarrassing moment.

* Likewise, what does P8 add?

Tan’s mature perspective on something that happened a long time ago. Her use of dashes emphasizes that her crush was fleeting, her conflict with her Chinese-American identity likely took longer to work through

* Explain the irony of the last sentence.

Tan was so embarrassed, but her mother had actually made all of her favorites. It speaks to Tan’s love of her own culture and her mother’s attentiveness as well.

* Why do you think Tan chose to call this short story “Fish Cheeks”?

The title pulls together the main conflict that is at play in the story - the narrator’s conflicted feeling concerning her heritage: seeing the food as odd and grotesque (as described in P3), the fact that it was her favorite part of the fish, her Dad’s offer and dialogue revealing her favorite part of the fish to her guests