“Fish Cheeks”

by Amy Tan

* + 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.
    2. 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?
    3. 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 bowl soaking dried fungus back to life. A plate of squid, their backs crisscrossed with knife markings so they resembled bicycle tires.
    4. And then they arrived—the minister’s family and all my relatives in a clamor of doorbells and rumpled Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence.
    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.
    6. At the end of the meal my father leaned back and burped 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.
    7. 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 a beige tweed. “But inside you must always be Chinese. You must be proud you are different. Your only shame is to have shame.”
    8. 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.
* How does Amy Tan establish context at the beginning of the story?
* Tan chooses to use several questions to develop P2. What effect does this have?
* Par 3 is full of imagery. How does Tan’s diction (word choice) influence the tone and purpose of this paragraph?
* Par 4 is only two sentences long. Why might Tan have chosen to make it so short?
* Why might Tan choose to use dialogue where she does and NOT include every word that was spoken at dinner?
* 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?
* 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?
* Likewise, what does P8 add?
* Explain the irony of the last sentence.
* Why do you think Tan chose to call this short story “Fish Cheeks”?