

“Fish Cheeks” by Amy Tan (1987) – Suggested Lesson Procedure (2 days)

1. Day 1: Have students complete the before reading journal prompt for the short story “Fish Cheeks.” This will preview what the literature is about and help students form personal connections to the text.
2. Review the vocabulary words and definitions. You can either read the definition aloud for students to write down, direct students to look up the definitions on their own, or have students fill in the definitions during reading by using context clues.
3. Read the story out loud as a class. The story is short and takes about 5-10 minutes on its own. I recommend having students answer the reading questions as you go, which takes at least 30-40 minute; make sure you are stopping to discuss answers with students to ensure comprehension. If your class finishes early, they can start the Day 2 activities.
4. Day 2: Direct students to work independently to answer the after reading questions. Once everyone is done, you can have volunteers share answers out loud for discussion.
5. Pass out the “Find someone in the class who...” worksheets. Explain to students the directions. Students will try to find someone in the class who fits each of the descriptions in the boxes on the worksheet by walking around the room and talking to each other. When they find a classmate who fits a certain description, that student will sign their initials in the box. This activity will expose students to other traditions, cultures, and lifestyles. Students become aware of customs their peers take part in, learn that there are other norms aside from their own, and they get to know their classmates better. Give students 10 minutes for this activity and conduct a short discussion afterward.
6. Students can work independently, in pairs, or in groups to complete the after reading analysis worksheet. The first part of the worksheet requires students to find specific quotes from the text to answer the questions. They must search the short story for textual evidence to use as support of what the prompt states.
7. The second part of the after reading analysis requires students to write an objective summary of the story, ensuring they use all of the words provided in the word bank. You can either collect students’ work for credit or review answers out loud as a class.

Note to teachers: Due to copyright law, I am unable to offer a full text version of the story. If you enter “Fish Cheeks by Amy Tan full text” into any search engine, you will find a copy of the story available for you to print and use in class. Here is the link I used: [Fish Cheeks by Amy Tan](#)

Name:

Date:

“Fish Cheeks” by Amy Tan
Journal Prompt

What is your favorite holiday to celebrate with your family or friends? Why is it your favorite holiday? What traditions do you participate in (food, activities, music, etiquette, ceremonies, etc)?

How does your family's holiday celebration differ from others?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

Name:

Date:

“Fish Cheeks” by Amy Tan
Vocabulary

Vocabulary Word	Part of Speech	Definition
Shabby	adj	PREVIEW
Appalling	adj	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE
Grimace	verb	PREVIEW
Clamor	noun	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE
Despair	noun	PREVIEW
Muster	verb	NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

During Reading Questions

1. From the first paragraph, what can you infer about the narrator’s race or ethnicity? Explain.

2. Who is Robert? Why is it important to Amy what he thinks?

PREVIEW

3. Why does Amy think her Christmas Eve party will disappoint the minister’s family?

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

4. What is Amy's attitude toward her Chinese heritage and family? Provide evidence to support your answer.

5. How does Amy's family act during dinner? How does the minister's family act during dinner? Why do they act so differently?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

6. What does the miniskirt in beige tweed symbolize?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

7. What does Amy's mother mean when she says the following? "Your only shame is to have shame."

8. How does Amy's point of view change as an adult?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

9. What is ironic about the last line of the story?

PREVIEW

10. What is the theme (universal message) of this story?

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

Name:

Date:

After Reading Questions

1. Have you ever been ashamed or embarrassed by your family? Explain.

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

2. What are some examples of cultural traditions?

PREVIEW

3. Do you think Amy's experience was authentic to a typical teenager? Why or why not?

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

4. Why do you think people are so afraid of being different?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

5. Amy's mother says, "You want to be the same as America girls on the outside... But inside you must always be Chinese." Do you agree or disagree with her advice? How does this quote contribute to the overall meaning of the story?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

FIND SOMEONE IN THE CLASS WHO...

Directions: Try to find someone in the class who fits each of the descriptions in the boxes below. When you find a classmate who fits a description, have them sign their initials in the box. Your classmates can only sign your paper once even if they fit more than one description.

Does not celebrate Christmas	Is from another country	Speaks another language	Has participated in fasting	Has a grandparent from another country
Has a parent from another country	Has blue eyes	Hugs or kisses their relatives when they see them	Believes in ghosts or spirits	Always respects their elders
Has eaten raw fish before	Lives with a grandparent	Has 3 or more siblings	Can play chess	Must babysit their younger siblings
Is always running late	Gets tan easily	Waits until everyone is seated and served food before eating	Listens to country music	Has an accent or speaks with a dialect
Has no siblings	Has traveled outside of the U.S.	Has a pet	Must complete chores at home	Knows how to make tapas
Knows American Sign Language	Does not eat meat	Has eaten frog legs before	Has been in a sauna before	Must get good grades in school
Slurps their soup	Knows how to meditate	Has tried matcha tea before	Must remove their shoes in their house	Has been to a baseball game before

Name:

Date:

“Fish Cheeks” by Amy Tan
After Reading Analysis

1. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy uses humor to deflect her shame.

PREVIEW

2. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story that shows Amy is self-conscious about her family's heritage.

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

3. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy is a relatable narrator.

PREVIEW

4. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy's family is kind or considerate.

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

5. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where the minister's family feels out of place.

PREVIEW

6. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy shows she has matured since that Christmas Eve.

PREVIEW

Write a summary using all of the words in the box below. Your summary should be between 50-100 words.

fish cheeks

menu

Chinese

fourteen

proud

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

ANSWER GUIDE
“Fish Cheeks” by Amy Tan
Vocabulary

Vocabulary Word	Part of Speech	Definition
Shabby	adj	Describes something unworthy or of low quality
Appalling	adj	Describes something shocking in a bad way
Grimace	verb	To make a facial expression that expresses disapproval or disgust
Clamor	noun	loud and strong noises
Despair	noun	An emotional state of complete hopelessness and sadness
Muster	verb	To summon up a particular response

During Reading Questions

1. From the first paragraph, what can you infer about the narrator’s race or ethnicity? Explain.

The narrator is a Chinese girl living in America. She mentions the boy she likes is white, not Chinese. The narrator also wishes she had an “American” nose.

2. Who is Robert? Why is it important to Amy what he thinks?

Robert is the minister’s son. Amy has a crush on him.

3. Why does Amy think her Christmas Eve party will disappoint the minister’s family?

Her family does not celebrate traditional American Christmas. For example, her family eats seafood, not a roasted turkey. Amy thinks Robert and his father will hate the food and think its weird.

4. What is Amy’s attitude toward her Chinese heritage and family? Provide evidence to support your answer.

Amy is embarrassed. She wishes her family adopted more of the American culture.

5. How does Amy’s family act during dinner? How does the minister’s family act during dinner? Why do they act so differently?

Amy’s family acts comfortable and noisily. They eat their food with chopsticks, lick the ends of the chopsticks, and belch after they are done eating. Burping after a meal is a compliment to the chef in

Chinese culture. Amy and her relatives act loud and at ease because they are enjoying the holiday in the way they are familiar with. They are in Amy's house where they feel they can be themselves.

The minister's family acts more reserved and are surprised. They are used to different traditions which is why they are shocked at the large amounts of fish and tofu on the table. The minister and his son are polite and quiet because they are trying to be respectful of Amy's family.

The two families grew up with different cultures and social norms, so they act differently.

6. What does the miniskirt in beige tweed symbolize?

The skirt symbolizes Amy's desire to belong. The skirt represents the American fashion of the time and the fact that Amy's mom understood how badly Amy wanted to fit in. Amy's mother gave her the skirt as a gift so that Amy would feel more American and accepted by her peers.

7. What does Amy's mother mean when she says the following? "Your only shame is to have shame."

Amy should not be embarrassed of her family's traditions, and it is wrong to be embarrassed by them.

8. How does Amy's point of view change as an adult?

Amy realizes as an adult that her mother and father taught her an important lesson that day. Although she was embarrassed, she sees now that there was nothing to be ashamed about. In fact, she realizes how much she appreciates her family for cooking an impressive meal filled with all of her favorite foods. Her parents' behaviors showed Amy that they are not ashamed of their culture, nor should she be; they were being good role-models by not hiding who they really are despite having American company over.

9. What is ironic about the last line of the story?

Amy says her mother cooked all her favorite foods that year; it is ironic because Amy is mortified by the menu and the food that is served that night. You wouldn't expect Amy to be so humiliated by all of the foods that she really likes.

10. What is the theme (universal message) of this story?

You should be proud of who you are.

Fitting in isn't as important as it seems.

It is difficult for a teenager to grow up with multiple identities.

We should appreciate diversity and what makes us all different.

It's valuable to learn about other cultures and customs in a fun and thoughtful way.

After Reading Questions

Answers will vary for all.

1. Have you ever been ashamed or embarrassed by your family? Explain.

2. What are some examples of cultural traditions?

3. Do you think Amy's experience was authentic to a typical teenager? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think people are so afraid of being different?

5. Amy's mother says, "You want to be the same as America girls on the outside... But inside you must always be Chinese." Do you agree or disagree with her advice? How does this quote contribute to the overall meaning of the story?

"Fish Cheeks" by Amy Tan
After Reading Analysis
Possible Answers

1. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy uses humor to deflect her shame.

He was not Chinese, but as white as Mary in the manger.

2. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story that shows Amy is self-conscious about her family's heritage.

What would he think of our noisy Chinese relatives who lacked proper American manners?

3. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy is a relatable narrator.

Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence.

4. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy's family is kind or considerate.

I knew that she understood how much I had suffered during the evening's dinner.

5. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where the minister's family feels out of place.

Robert was looking down at his plate with a reddened face.

6. Find a piece of textual evidence from the story where Amy shows she has matured since that Christmas 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.

Write a summary using all of the words in the box below. Your summary should be between 50-100 words.

fish cheeks

menu

Chinese

fourteen

proud

Possible Answer

In the story "Fish Cheeks" by Amy Tan, a fourteen year old girl is embarrassed when the local minister and his family come over to her house for Christmas Eve dinner. Amy's parents are Chinese immigrants and celebrate the holidays engaging in Chinese traditions and customs. Amy, who has a crush on the minister's son, is embarrassed by her family's heritage, to include their unusual menu and general mannerisms. Amy learns at the end of the story to always be proud of where you come from and who you are.