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# The Autobiographical Narrative in Fish Cheeks by Amy Tan

## Fish Cheeks

In the autobiographical narrative "Fish Cheeks," Amy Tan contrasts her perspective at a Christmas dinner with the other individuals at the same Christmas dinner to highlight her cultural shame. The embarrassment Tan feels of her culture is a main perspective depicted throughout this narrative. Everyone at the dinner has a greatly different perspective: The minister's family has an American point of view and follows American customs. Tan's family and relatives view the Christmas dinner through the eyes of a Chinese person, a holiday event celebrated with Chinese customs and topped off with a feast of Chinese food. Lastly, Tan views the Christmas dinner as a Chinese born American. Born and raised in America, Tan has a slightly Americanized perspective of what a Christmas dinner should be like, but still understands Chinese culture. Her American view of a Christmas dinner is reinforced, however, when she finds out her American love interest, Robert, will be at the dinner. She feels that she must conform to American culture in order to be accepted by him, thus, Tan's shame of her Chinese culture is amplified by the presence of Robert. This can be seen clearly as Tan often revolves around the thoughts of him in her narrative. She asks questions such as "What would Robert think of our shabby Chinese Christmas?" and "What would he think of our noisy Chinese relatives who lacked proper American manners?" Robert's name is never attached to a positive word; even his greeting is described as a measly "grunt." This subconsciously adds to the notion that he does not enjoy Chinese culture. Furthermore, Tan's use of the words "Chinese" and "American" highlights the contrast between the two vastly different cultures. Often mentioning Robert's thoughts, Tan successfully emphasizes her fear of disappointing him with her strange, exotic culture compared to the American norm. For example, as the steamed fish was being served, "Robert grimaced," followed by Tan saying "I wanted to disappear." This is a direct example of how Robert's opinion of Tan influenced her cultural shame. Due to Robert's presence, Tan feels nothing but pure embarrassment of her culture.

Tan's attempts to conform to American culture can also be seen throughout the narrative. She uses unappealing words such as "raw" and "slimy" to describe the "strange menu" her mother cooked up for the Christmas dinner. Tan compares tofu to "stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges" and squid to "bicycle tires," even when Tan reveals that these were her favorites near the end of the story. The unpleasant description of these foods portrays Tan's attempt to reject her native Chinese culture for Robert's sake. Later on, the two cultures come together with a clash at the dinner table, and it "threw [Tan] deeper into despair." The contrast between the cultures emphasized Tan's want to follow American tradition. Tan then contrasts the

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cultures even more by differentiating the eating styles of the two groups. Tan's "relatives licked the ends of their chopsticks and reached across the table," while "Robert and his family waited patiently for platters to be passed to them." Perhaps the most significant event, the one the narrative is named after, is the offering of the fish cheek from Tan's father to Tan. In the process of the offering, her father reveals to everyone that this is her most-liked food, saying, "Amy, your favorite." Unbeknownst to her father, Tan is horrified when he exposes that her favorite food is something extremely atypical in American culture. In this moment, Tan feels she has failed to conform to American culture and will not be accepted by the American guests at the dinner. This feeling is only amplified by the presence of her crush, Robert, as she thinks she will be forever branded as a strange, Chinese, fish cheek-eating girl by him. After the meal, Tan's "father leaned back and belched loudly," something considered rude in American culture. Tan's father then explains that it is acceptable in Chinese culture to the "astonished guests." Since Tan wants to conform to American culture to gain the acceptance of Robert, she is ashamed to show him the vast difference of her culture, and is "stunned into silence for the rest of the night." When the minister's family leaves, Tan's mother acknowledges her daughter's endeavor to conform and be noticed by her crush, saying, "You want to be the same as American girls on the outside." She then gives an important lesson to Tan. "But inside you must always be Chinese. You must be proud you are different. Your only shame is to have shame."

Through specific language and details in writing, Tan effectively portrays the largely contrasting perspectives of the individuals at the Christmas dinner. She recounts her inner struggle of two conflicting cultures, magnified by the presence of Robert. She uses the perspective of Robert to further emphasize her fear of disappointing him due to Chinese culture. Although at the time Tan felt that the dinner was a catastrophe, looking back, she realizes she learned a very important life lesson from her mother's perspective. In the end, she gains a new perspective by reflecting on this event, and only then is she finally "able to fully appreciate [her mother's] lesson."

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