

READING 7

The Catcher of Ghosts

Amy Tan

Amy Tan is an American writer. One of her most well-known novels is *The Joy Luck Club*. She has explored themes such as mother-daughter relationships and cultural issues. As you read this descriptive story, which appeared in her book *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, also look for elements of narration and cause and effect.

- 1 When we returned home, Mother and Father, as well as our aunts and uncles, were bunched in the courtyard, talking in excited voices. Father was relating how he had met an old Taoist priest at the market, a remarkable and strange man. As he passed by, the priest had called out to him: "Sir, you look as if a ghost is plaguing your house."
- 2 "Why do you say that?" Father asked.
- 3 "It's true, isn't it?" the old man insisted. "I feel you've had a lot of bad luck and there's no other reason for it. Am I right?"
- 4 "We had a suicide," Father admitted, "a nursemaid whose daughter was about to be married."
- 5 "And bad luck followed."
- 6 "A few calamities," Father answered.
- 7 The young man standing next to the priest then asked Father if he had heard of the famous Catcher of Ghosts. "No? Well, this is he, the wandering priest right before you. He's newly arrived in your town, so he's not yet as well known as he is in places far to the north and south. Do you have relatives in Harbin? No? Well, then! If you had, you'd know who he is." The young man, who claimed to be the priest's acolyte, added, "In that city alone, he is celebrated for having already caught one hundred ghosts in disturbed households. When he was done, the gods told him to start wandering again."
- 8 When Father finished telling us how he had met these two men, he added, "This afternoon, the famous Catcher of Ghosts is coming to our house."
- 9 A few hours later, the Catcher of Ghosts and his assistant stood in our courtyard. The priest had a white beard, and his long hair was piled like a messy bird's nest. In one hand he carried a walking stick with a carved end that looked like a flayed dog stretched over a gateway. In the other, he held a short beating stick. Slung over his shoulders was a rope shawl from which hung a large wooden bell. His robe was not the sand-colored cotton of most wandering monks I had seen. His was a rich-looking blue silk, but the sleeves were grease-stained, as if he had often reached across the table for more to eat.

Harbin: a large town in northeastern China

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expressed by Richard
do you agree, and why?

- 10 I watched hungrily as Mother offered him special cold dishes. It was late afternoon, and we were sitting on low stools in the courtyard. The monk helped himself to everything—glass noodles with spinach, bamboo shoots with pickled mustard, tofu seasoned with sesame seed oil and coriander. Mother kept apologizing about the quality of the food, saying she was both ashamed and honored to have him in our shabby home. Father was drinking tea. “Tell us how it’s done,” he said to the priest, “this catching of ghosts. Do you seize them in your fists? Is the struggle fierce or dangerous?”
- 11 The priest said he would soon show us. “But first I need proof of your sincerity.” Father gave his word that we were indeed sincere. “Words are not proof,” the priest said.
- 12 “How do you prove sincerity?” Father asked.
- 13 “In some cases, a family might walk from here to the top of Mount Tai and back, barefoot and carrying a load of rocks.” Everyone, especially my aunts, looked doubtful that any of us could do that.
- 14 “In other cases,” the monk continued, “a small offering of pure silver can be enough and will cover the sincerity of all members of the immediate family.”
- 15 “How much might be enough?” Father asked.
- 16 The priest frowned. “Only you know if your sincerity is little or great, fake or genuine.”
- 17 The monk continued eating. Father and Mother went to another room to discuss the amount of their sincerity. When they returned, Father opened a pouch and pulled out a silver ingot and placed this in front of the famous Catcher of Ghosts.
- 18 “This is good,” the priest said. “A little sincerity is better than none at all.”
- 19 Mother then drew an ingot from the sleeve of her jacket. She slid this next to the first so that the two made a clinking sound. The monk nodded and put down his bowl. He clapped his hands, and the assistant took from his bundle an empty vinegar jar and wad of string.
- 20 “Where’s the girl that the ghost loved best?” asked the priest.
- 21 “There,” Mother said, and pointed to me. “The ghost was her nursemaid.”
- 22 The priest said to me, “Fetch me the comb she used for your hair.”
- 23 My feet were locked to the ground until Mother gave me a little knock on the head to hurry. So I went to the room. Precious Auntie and I had shared not so long before. I picked up the comb she used to run through my hair. It was the ivory comb she never wore, its ends carved with roosters, its teeth long and straight. I remembered how Precious Auntie used to scold me for my tangles, worrying over every hair on my head.
- 24 When I returned, I saw the assistant had placed the vinegar jar in the middle of the courtyard. “Run the comb through your hair nine times,” he said. So I did.
- 25 “Place it in the jar.” I dropped the comb inside, smelling the escape of cheap vinegar fumes. “Now stand there perfectly still.” The Catcher of Ghosts beat his stick on the wooden bell. It made a deep kwak, kwak sound. He and the acolyte walked in rhythm, circling me, chanting, and drawing closer. Without warning, the Catcher of Ghosts gave a shout and leapt toward me. I thought he was going to squeeze me into the jar, so I closed my eyes and screamed, as did Gaoling.
- 26 When I opened my eyes, I saw the acolyte was pounding a tight-fitting wooden lid onto the jar. He wove rope from top to bottom, bottom to top, then all around the jar, until it resembled a hornet’s nest. When this was done, the younger

Catcher of Ghosts caught. Go ahead.

27 Everyone laughed.

“Not possible,” Mother said. “More than seven.”

Vocabulary and Grammar

1. Find a word in line 10 that means “not possible.”
2. Why do Mother and Father say “not possible”?
3. Who is the ghost?
4. A simile is a comparison. Circle the author uses similes in lines 11–15.
5. The author uses sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Circle the author uses touch in lines 16–20.

Critical Thinking

6. Who is Precious Auntie? Explain.
7. What can you infer about the ghost? “What does ‘sincerity’ mean?”
8. What can you infer about the ghost?

In special cold dishes. It was late in the courtyard. The monk with spinach, bamboo shoots with seed oil and coriander. Mother kept silent, but no one would touch. Father asked, “Can she escape?”

²⁷ “Not possible,” said the Catcher of Ghosts. “This jar is guaranteed to last more than several lifetimes.”

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Vocabulary and Comprehension

1. Find a word in paragraph 7 that means “helper.”

2. Why do Mother and Father need the services of the Catcher of Ghosts?

3. Who is the ghost and what relationship did it have with the family?

4. A simile is a comparison using *like* or *as*. Underline an example of a simile that the author uses to describe the priest.

5. The author uses imagery in this essay. Give an example of the following:
sight: _____
sound: _____
smell: _____

6. Who is Precious Auntie?

7. What can you infer, or guess, about the Catcher of Ghosts when he asks for “proof of sincerity?”

8. What can you infer about the characters of Mother and Father from their actions?

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