

## ***Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress: Part 2***

*"Picture, if you will, a boy of nineteen, still slumbering in the limbo of adolescence, having heard nothing but revolutionary blather about patriotism... falling headlong into a story of awakening desire, passion, impulsive action, love, of all the subjects that had been hidden from me."*

Part 2 of the novel focuses on the narrator and Luo's new friend Four-Eyes, who gets his name from the glasses he wears. Four-Eyes possesses a secret cache of censored books and Luo bargains with him to lend them a book in return for helping him finish his field-work. Four-Eyes gives them a copy of Balzac's *Ursule Mirouet* which Luo gives the narrator when he's done. While the narrator reads the book, Luo meets the Little Seamstress and they make love together under a ginkgo tree.

Later, Four-Eyes brags of an opportunity to leave the mountain by collecting stories and songs of the region for a literary journal. But, try as he might, he could not get a local miller, denizen of the mountain, to tell him any songs. Luo makes another bargain with Four-Eyes; more books in return for the songs. Four-Eyes agrees and Luo and the narrator disguise themselves as soldiers and visit the miller. He enjoys their company and sings them bawdy songs which they write down and present to Four-Eyes. However, he deems the songs too 'smutty' and refuses to honour his part of the agreement.

Angered by his arrogance, Luo and the narrator learn that Four-Eyes' mother is on the way to the mountain to collect her son. The narrator meets her, and she confirms that Four-Eyes has been appointed to work at the journal. He reports back to Luo and the Little Seamstress – and they hatch a plan to steal the cache of books from Four-Eyes before he leaves.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. What are the chances of the boys being released back home from re-education?**

- (a) One in a hundred.
- (b) Three in a hundred.
- (c) One in a thousand.
- (d) Three in a thousand.

**2. What is the first novel Four-Eyes loans the boys?**

- (a) *Ursule Mirouet*.
- (b) *The Count of Monte Cristo*.
- (c) *Jean Christophe*.
- (d) *The Little Red Book*.

**3. Who found Four-Eyes' glasses after they fell in the mud?**

- (a) Four-Eyes
- (b) Luo.
- (c) The narrator.
- (d) No-one.

**4. Who is the Albanian Communist who's books were permitted to be sold in China?**

- (a) Ismail Kadare.
- (b) Enver Hoxha.
- (c) Edi Rama.
- (d) Dua Lipa.

**5. What is 'somnambulism'?**

- (a) Lack of sleep.
- (b) Insomnia.
- (c) Sleep deprivation.
- (d) Sleepwalking.

**6. Where does the old miller live?**

- (a) Thousand Meter Cliff.
- (b) Hundred Acre Wood.
- (c) Nine Mile Island.
- (d) Eighty Leagues Under the Sea.

**7. What dialect does the narrator use that the old miller cannot understand?**

- (a) Sichuan dialect.
- (b) Guangdong dialect.
- (c) Beijing dialect.
- (d) Shanghai dialect.

**8. Why does the narrator punch Four-Eyes?**

- (a) He would not lend them any more books.
- (b) He insulted Luo.
- (c) He changed the words to the miller's song.
- (d) He refused to pay them for their work.

**9. Who's idea is it to steal the cache of books?**

- (a) The little seamstress.
- (b) The narrator.
- (c) Luo.
- (d) The old miller.

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## Understanding and Interpretation

*Skim and scan part 2 to answer these questions in more detail:*

1. The narrator is quite a self-deprecating character and repeatedly puts himself second when it comes to his relationship with Luo. Find examples of the narrator's subservience to Luo in this part of the novel, or elsewhere:
2. How does Luo and the Little Seamstress' relationship develop in this part of the novel?
3. Describe the boys' visit to the old miller. How do they persuade him to share his raunchy folk songs? How did they succeed where Four-Eyes failed?
4. The narrator encounters Four-Eyes' mother arriving at the village. Describe her character and summarise what she is doing on the mountain:
5. On page 93, the narrator and Luo discover and open Four-Eyes case of illicit books. How does this act make the narrator feel? What writing techniques powerfully convey this important moment in the story?
6. When the boys open Four-Eyes' suitcase they find the bloodied buffalo tail inside, kept by Four-Eyes like a trophy. What does this object tell you about the way Four-Eyes ultimately viewed the people of the village and his time on the mountain?

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## Important Character: *Four-Eyes*

Four-Eyes is another young man sent for re-education in a nearby village on Phoenix of the Sky mountain. His parents are writers and he dreams that one day he will be a writer as well. Nevertheless, for now, he must toil all day in the fields, accompanied only by a stubborn buffalo. Four-Eyes wears glasses (the only pair to be found on all the mountain) and he lives in a constant state of anxiety that he will never be allowed to leave the countryside.

Four-Eyes is a difficult character to love: he's generally suspicious of others, believes the worst in everyone, and behaves selfishly. In fact, Four-Eyes' character helps to foreground the theme of selfishness in the novel. The narrator overhears him say that he's only befriended the two of them so that one day he might be able to exploit their friendship to get dental work for his father and mother. He also tries to go back on a promise to compensate the boys for the folk songs that they collected for him. Four-Eyes may not be a wholly selfish character, but his situation seems to bring out the worst of this personality trait in him.

Nevertheless, Four-Eyes certainly doesn't believe in his re-education or the ideals of Communism. He simply pretends to be a good revolutionary to increase his chances of being allowed to leave. Possibly the most important of Four-Eyes' possessions is the suitcase of illicit books that he keeps hidden in his room. He jealously guards this secret, knowing that should the books be discovered he will almost certainly never be allowed to leave. Nevertheless, when it comes down to it, Four-Eyes is willing to use his books to purchase the aid of Luo and the narrator and improve his chances of getting a job with a revolutionary journal; a job that will get him out of the village and off the mountain that he hates so much.

### Activity

Is Four-Eyes the only character to act selfishly in the novel? Collect examples of selfish acts, whether committed by Four-Eyes or other characters. Conversely, are there any examples of selflessness? Which list is easier to compile? Consider what the author might be implying by including so many acts of selfishness in the novel:

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Discussion Point: *the idealised peasant*



**艰苦奋斗创新业 扎根农村志不移**

This propaganda poster taken from 1977 presents the image of the idealised peasant; he is strong, clean, able-bodied, young, noble and completely devoted to the work of transforming Communist China. The inscription reads: *Hard Work and Innovation are Rooted in the Countryside.*



In this part of the novel, the boys visit an old miller to retrieve the lyrics to traditional folk songs for Four-Eyes. It doesn't take long to realise that this character bears little or no resemblance to the idealised picture of the noble peasant! Compare the picture painted of the old miller by Dai Sijie to this propaganda image; consider the depiction of other peasant villagers from the novel as well. Discuss to what extent Dai Sijie counters the idealised image of the noble peasant.

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### Important Theme: *The Power of Literature*

*"With these books I shall transform the Little Seamstress. She'll never be a simple mountain girl again."*  
(p94)

Very early on in the novel, the narrator asserts that telling stories is *'a pleasing talent... but a marginal one, with little future in it.'* (p18). He says that *'modern man has moved beyond the age of the Thousand and One Nights and modern societies everywhere... have done away with the old storyteller.'* In short, the narrator believes that stories and storytelling is worthless in the modern age. However, almost immediately, whether knowingly or unknowingly, the narrator sets out to disprove himself. On the very same page, he relates how the village headman – a devout follower of Mao's Cultural Revolution – puts aside his revolutionary ideals for the chance to listen to a good story. The narrator even calls him *'the last of the lordly devotees of narrative eloquence'* and the headman rewards those who can entertain him in the old tradition of telling fireside tales.

Therefore, throughout *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, books and literature are **transactional**; in other words, they can be used as currency. In an early scene in the story, Luo and the narrator are able to trade the act of storytelling for time off work when the headman grants them four days each to memorise films and recite them for the villagers. Similarly, the folk stories gathered by the boys have real-world value when Four-Eyes is able to leverage them for a position at a literary journal. In this part of the novel, Four-Eyes 'pays' the boys by loaning them a novel by Balzac and later on the narrator will use books as a bribe to secure the services of a gynaecologist. All these examples demonstrate that stories, books and literature have real, **transactional** value.



HONORÉ DE BALZAC  
*Ursule Mirouet*

Secondly, stories and books are shown to be **transformational**. Most obviously, Luo uses his skills as an orator of stories to seduce the Little Seamstress, making her fall in love with him. On page 58, Luo muses, *'This fellow Balzac is a wizard... He touched the head of this mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed, carried away in a dream.'* Less obviously, reading Balzac has a **transformative** effect on the narrator as well. On page 54 he becomes enamoured with the character of Ursule from *Ursule Mirouet*, saying, *'I longed to be like her.'* He copies passages from Balzac onto the cracked skin of his sheepskin coat and admits, *'it was the first time in my life that I had felt any desire to copy sentences from a book.'* It can hardly be a co-incidence that, on the same page, the narrator also says, *'Suddenly, I felt a stab of jealousy, a bitter, wrenching emotion I had never felt before.'* Throughout the novel, storytelling and books pave the way for characters to develop, change and enter into new stages of life.

## Quotation Bank

*If you only remember three lines, remember these...*

<p><i>In spite of my complete ignorance of that distant land called France... Ursule's story rang as true as if it had been about my neighbours. (p53)</i></p>	<p>As the narrator reads Balzac's novels, he discovers the rest of the world is not a frightening, evil or alien place. He can easily relate to the stories of people as far away as France, revealed by the <b>simile</b> of Ursule being like 'my neighbours.' His insights undermine the goals of the Cultural Revolution; the narrator's coming of age is mediated by French literature rather than Chinese re-education.</p>
<p><i>I could have read it [Balzac] out, page by page, to the Little Seamstress. That would have made her more refined, more cultured, I'm quite sure. (p53)</i></p>	<p>As Luo laments returning Balzac to Four-Eyes, his <b>tone of voice</b> reveals the arrogance in his character. He decides to conduct a little of his own 're-education' on the Little Seamstress to make her more appealing. His <b>tone</b> is quite condescending; he makes no secret of the fact that he looks down on his girlfriend for her lack of education. Later he calls her a 'mountain girl' in the same condescending way.</p>
<p><i>Tell me, What does she fear? She fears the old monk.</i></p>	<p>These few lines are from the old miller's song that he sings for Luo and the narrator. The song suggests the old monk wants to sleep with the young nun, which is a bawdy and explicit <b>innuendo</b>. The lyrics of the song, and the relish with which the old miller sings, <b>contrast</b> with the idealised image of the noble peasant that was propagated by the government during the years of re-education.</p>
<p><i>Based on your own reading of Part 2 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:</i></p>	