

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress: Part 3.2 (page 137 – 172)

"The lovely, unsophisticated mountain girl had vanished without a trace."

Luo's mother is sick, so he is permitted to return home for one month. Before he leaves, he asks the narrator to look after the Little Seamstress until he returns. The narrator takes his chance to draw closer to the Little Seamstress; he washes her clothes, shows her how to manicure her nails and reads more Balzac to her. One day, after the narrator has a close call with a gang of local village boys, the Little Seamstress tells him she is pregnant with Luo's baby. Unfortunately, this puts her in a very difficult situation: being pregnant outside marriage is illegal, being married before the age of 25 is illegal – and arranging an abortion is illegal as well!

In desperation, the narrator goes to the nearest town, Yong Jing, to find help. He learns of a Christian preacher who may be able to help him, but discovers the preacher is in the hospital. When the narrator visits him, he has the opportunity to visit a gynaecologist, and persuades him to help the Little Seamstress. In exchange for giving her an illegal abortion, the narrator gives the gynaecologist two books by Balzac.

A month later, after Luo has returned, the two of them hear a commotion in the village. The tailor has arrived – and he brings some surprising news. His daughter, the Little Seamstress, has left! The two boys set off in pursuit, hoping to persuade her to stay. But, after a final encounter between her and Luo on the mountain path, she finally runs away. Luo tells his friend that Balzac taught her that she can find a better life for herself in the city. The narrator is distraught – he feels betrayed because the Seamstress left without telling him goodbye.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What role does the narrator imagine playing as he looks after the seamstress?

- (a) Tinker.
- (b) Tailor.
- (c) Soldier.
- (d) Secret Agent.

2. What novel does the narrator read to the seamstress while Luo is away?

- (a) Ursule Mirouet.
- (b) The Count of Monte Cristo.
- (c) Cousin Pons.
- (d) Madame Bovary.

3. What weapon does the cripple boy carry when he threatens the narrator?

- (a) A knife.
- (b) A catapult.
- (c) A gun.
- (d) A spear.

4. Whose portrait welcomes patients outside the Yong Jing hospital?

- (a) Chairman Mao.
- (b) William Shakespeare.
- (c) Robinson Crusoe.
- (d) Lenin.

5. Which of these is NOT a description of the gynaecologist?

- (a) Fortyish.
- (b) Unshaven.
- (c) Tired-looking.
- (d) Lanky hair.

6. What is the name of the man who translated Balzac?

- (a) Du Fu.
- (b) Li Bai.
- (c) Fu Lei.
- (d) Tai Po.

7. What is an *auto-da-fe*?

- (a) Book burning.
- (b) Public shaming.
- (c) Illegal marriage.
- (d) Car manufacturing.

8. What most surprises the narrator about the seamstress when he sees her at the end of the novel?

- (a) She is wearing make-up.
- (b) She has grown taller.
- (c) She has cut her hair.
- (d) She has gotten a Phoenix tattoo.

Understanding and Interpretation

Skim and scan part 3 (pages 137 – 172) to answer these questions:

1. In what ways do the Little Seamstress and the narrator draw closer during this part of the novel?
2. The narrator has a habit of putting himself second, below other people, especially Luo. Is there evidence of him continuing to do this, despite his growth throughout the novel?
3. Describe the scene at the old preacher's bedside (pages 155 – 158):
4. Why is the gynaecologist unwilling to give an abortion? How does the narrator persuade him?
5. Why is Luo burning all the books at the end of the story? In what way is this act symbolic?
6. How does the narrator feel about the Little Seamstress leaving at the end of the story? What does this moment reveal about the theme of friendship in the novel?

Important Theme: *Censorship*

As part of Mao's policies of modernizing China, any kind of art, music or literature that didn't support the political aims of the government were banned. This included Western works and classic Chinese literature as well. The intention of censorship in China was to remove the means by which people learn about other ways of living, because many artistic works reveal that people elsewhere in the world can live happy and fulfilled lives. Works of art and literature that depict systems different to Communism being successful would take power away from the government. However, Dai Sijie's novel reveals the limitations of censorship when it comes to suppressing ideas – in short, the very act of banning an item makes it more valuable, and therefore more powerful, than it may otherwise have been.

Take the novel by Romain Rolland, which is the narrator's favourite. From *Jean-Christophe*, the narrator learns that individuals who challenge society are noble and good. This point of view gives him the strength and resolve to challenge the system he lives in, especially in this chapter when he arranges an illegal abortion for the Little Seamstress. Dai Sijie therefore shows that forbidding literature may not lead to an obedient population – quite the opposite, it may lead to forbidden actions instead. Secondly, the narrator uses two of Balzac's works as currency to quite literally pay for the operation. This is only possible because banning books has made them rare and therefore more valuable to those who don't fully buy into the ideals of the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, by attempting to disempower people, the government gave those who might have access to forbidden materials more power!

Activity

What examples in the novel reveal that banning an item, practice or story often has the opposite effect of making the item, practice, or story in question more valuable? Complete this chart with your ideas:

Censored item, story, or practice	Consequences of censorship
<i>Jean-Christophe</i> by Romain Rolland	<i>The narrator discovers the idea of independence by reading this banned work. He comes to think that individuals who stand up against society are noble and good, and acts on this ideal when he secretly arranges an illegal abortion for the little seamstress.</i>
The works of Balzac	

Discussion Point: *does the narrator love the Little Seamstress?*

“I wondered what was making me chase Luo across this treacherous mountain slope? Was it friendship? Was it affection for his girlfriend? Or was I merely an onlooker anxious not to miss the ending of a drama?” – page 169

At the end of the novel, the narrator and Luo discover the Little Seamstress is leaving to chase her own dreams in the big city. They chase after her to try and stop her. After several hours, they catch sight of her by the graveyard near Yong Jing. At this point, the narrator purposefully holds back while Luo goes to persuade her to stay by himself.

Why doesn't the narrator play a part in convincing the Little Seamstress to stay? What are the answers to some of the questions he poses himself (above)? How does he feel about her leaving? Do you think he is in love with her? Discuss your ideas about the narrator's feelings towards the Little Seamstress at the end of the novel.

Quotation Bank

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

<i>There was no conceivable place where a Romeo and his pregnant Juliet might elude the long arm of the law, nor indeed where they might live the life of Robinson Crusoe attended by a secret agent turned Man Friday. (p149)</i>	When the narrator thinks about the predicament of Luo and the Little Seamstress he compares them to characters from famous works of literature. On one hand, this reveals his growth as a character; he now sees the events in his life in terms of the books he has read. On the other hand, these allusions reveal that he still sees himself as a supporting player in Luo's story. Romeo and Juliet were the protagonists of Shakespeare's favourite play, and Man Friday was a servant to Robinson Crusoe in this famous shipwreck story. The way the narrator 'demotes' himself from secret-agent to servant when Luo returns reveals his habit of always deferring to his friend.
<i>It was insane, but the bourgeois intellectuals upon which the Communists had inflicted so much hardship were no less morally strict than their persecutors. (p153)</i>	When the narrator is arranging an illegal abortion for the Little Seamstress, he thinks about his parents and how they would disapprove of what he is doing – in fact they would disown him immediately! The fact that the narrator is able to think so clearly about his situation shows his growth as a character over the course of the novel. It is also an important aim of Dai Sijie not to demonise people on either side of the Cultural Revolution – the fact that the narrator's parents could support some of Mao's policies, even against their own son, suggests it's not about 'good' and 'bad' but about ordinary people who think differently from each other.