

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress: Part 3.1 (page 101 – 136)

"If you, the son of a great dentist, can cure my tooth, I'll leave your friend here alone."

The boys encounter a stroke of good fortune: the village headman leaves for a party conference so they have a month of lax supervision. They spend the entire month reading all the books from Four-Eyes' secret suitcase. The narrator is most impressed by *Jean-Christophe*, a novel by Romain Rolland. Luo spends his days reading to the Little Seamstress. For a month their lives are almost idyllic, the only excitement they experience is a storm that ravages the path between their village and the Little Seamstress' house. Their month of peace and quiet finally comes to an end when the headman returns. He is angry and in pain as he received poor dentistry in Yong Jing. Since Luo's father is a dentist he asks Luo to help him, but Luo refuses.

A few days later, the tailor arrives in the village. Despite offers from other villagers, he decides to stay with Luo and the narrator. Before bed on the first night, he asks for a story and the narrator begins to recite *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The tailor is hooked, and the storytelling continues every night for nine nights. One night, however, the headman bursts in and catches them. He is angered and accuses the boys of spreading reactionary trash. He uses this accusation as leverage over the boys; if Luo agrees to give him dental treatment, he won't report the narrator to the Public Security Bureau.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What does Luo fear?

- (a) Lightning.
- (b) Heights.
- (c) Spiders.
- (d) Balzac.

2. Which bird witnesses the narrator and Luo crossing the ridge in the storm?

- (a) A crow.
- (b) An owl.
- (c) A raven.
- (d) An ostrich.

3. When the tailor stays at their house, what story does the narrator recite?

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

4. Who overhears their nightly storytelling?

- (a) The headman.
- (b) The Little Seamstress.
- (c) The old miller.
- (d) Four-Eyes' mother.

5. With what material does the headman want Luo to repair his tooth?

- (a) Silver.
- (b) Copper.
- (c) Tin.
- (d) Gold.

6. How much time off work is the headman prepared to pay for dental treatment?

- (a) Three days.
- (b) Two weeks.
- (c) One month.
- (d) Four months.

7. What item does the Little Seamstress retrieve from the bottom of the pond?

- (a) Luo's key ring.
- (b) Four-Eyes' glasses.
- (c) The alarm clock.
- (d) A stone.

8. Who sees Luo and the Little Seamstress' tryst at the secluded pool?

- (a) The old miller.
- (b) The headman.
- (c) Four-Eyes.
- (d) A spy.

9. What is happening at Luo's home?

- (a) His brother is graduating.
- (b) His father is retiring.
- (c) His mother is ill.
- (d) His aunt has won the lottery.

10. What lives in the pool and bites the Little Seamstress?

- (a) A lobster.
- (b) A snake.
- (c) An alligator.
- (d) An eel.

Understanding and Interpretation

Skim and scan part 3 (pages 101 – 136) to answer these questions:

1. What is the narrator's favourite book, and why? What does it teach him?
2. On pages 114 – 116 the narrator begins to tell the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. What does this scene reveal about the changing character of the narrator? How is language used in effective ways in this scene?
3. What does this chapter, in particular the incident with the headman's tooth, reveal about the aims and successes of the 'Up to the Mountain, Down to the Countryside' movement?
4. How does Luo's use of language when he remembers teaching the Little Seamstress to swim (on page 129) reveal his attitude towards his girlfriend?
5. How do the scenes recounted by Luo and the Little Seamstress reveal that education can have unintended consequences?

Novel Study: *Differing Perspectives*

Quite unexpectedly, this section of the novel **switches perspective** three times to passages narrated by other characters. Firstly, the old miller narrates his voyeuristic witnessing of Luo and the little Seamstress making love in a secluded pool. He seems simultaneously disgusted and entranced by the sight. Then, Luo takes over the narration. He recounts how he taught the Little Seamstress to swim and dive, and how she loved to dive for his key rings. Finally, the Seamstress takes over the story, revealing that Luo's stories filled her with the urge to dive. She also describes a time when she and Luo acted out a scene from *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Afterwards, she dove into the pool where she was bitten by a snake. The snake left a scar on her hand and she never found Luo's keys.

Activity

What is the effect of the sudden narrative switches in part 3? After all, the different characters recount the same scene at the secluded pool. What does the reader discover from one version of the story that is not revealed in the other scenes? How do the differing perspectives reveal secrets that only certain characters hold?

Consider each scene separately and complete the following table:

| Different Viewpoints | | |
|----------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| The old miller | Luo | The Little Seamstress |
| | | |

Discussion Point: *Learner Profile - Inquirer*

'We were seduced, overwhelmed, spellbound by the mystery of the outside world' (p101)

On one level, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is a simple coming-of-age story. The Phoenix of the Sky mountain functions as a 'liminal space' in which the boys (and the Little Seamstress) are no longer children – but nor are they fully adults. It is in this limbo, which you can think of like the chrysalis inside which a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, that the transformation of the adolescents takes place.

The catalyst for their coming-of-age is the Western Literature they begin to read. As most works of imaginative literature, Western or Chinese, had been banned under the policies of the Cultural Revolution, the only thing the narrator and Luo could read was Mao's 'Little Red Book.' For this reason, just the thought of reading other books is intoxicating to the narrator. On page 102 he describes the act of reading like falling in love for the first time. The novels in Four-Eyes' case become little windows through which the teenagers get to see the wider world clearly. You'll probably have noticed that Luo and the Little Seamstress have sex for the first time after reading Balzac's *Ursule Mirouet*. For them, Balzac was a type of 'guide' who introduced them to the adult world of sexuality.

Other books have a similar effect on the narrator, quickening his induction into the adult world. For example, he develops his own unique values after reading *Jean-Christophe* by Romain Rollande. On page 101, the narrator says, *'we were seduced, overwhelmed, spellbound by the mystery of the outside world'*. Growing up in Mao's Communist China, this idea goes against everything any adult would have taught the narrator in his life up to now. After reading *Jean-Christophe*, the narrator longs to possess something that is wholly his own, and even finds it within him to trick Luo into 'gifting' him some of Four-Eyes' books. He also begins to imagine what Rollande's character would do or say in certain situations, such as when he is stuck on the mountain ridge (page 106). Later, thanks to the words of Balzac, the Little Seamstress will also find it within herself to act independently – and surprises both Luo and the narrator. Therefore, Dai Sijie's novel seems to suggest that, while books are the starting point in a person's coming of age, one reaches maturity only when they are able to assert independent actions based on what they have learned.

The act of reading with an open mind, and allowing the works you read to have a transformative effect, is a type of **inquiry**, as defined in the IB Student Learner Profile. Have you ever read a book that had a transformative effect on you? Or a book that opened your eyes to an aspect of life that had been hidden away? Do you think that young people today need books to mediate their coming-of-age? If not books, what?

Novel Study: *Setting*

Pages 126 to 136 recount Luo and the Little Seamstress' secret meetings at a secluded pool, hidden in a small valley. The tale, already told in the style of a fable, becomes even more stylistically allegorical over these three chapters and the secluded pool is a setting that resonates symbolically in the novel. For example, on page 129, Luo describes the setting as a *'watery paradise'*, associating it with the Garden of Eden. The loincloth worn by the Little Seamstress resembles the leaves worn by Adam and Eve in pictures of paradise – and there's even a snake lurking at the bottom of the mysterious pool.

Activity

Consider the various elements of the secluded pool scene **symbolically**. What associations, allusions and symbolic meanings can you attribute to the different parts of the scene?

| Elements of the scene | Symbolism |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <i>Ginkgo trees</i> | Luo comments on the towering ginkgo trees that surround the pool. They act as a screen, isolating the couple from the outside world. On page 129, Luo describes the secluded pool as a ' <i>watery paradise</i> ', which creates an association with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The loin-cloth the Seamstress fashions out of leaves even resembles the fig leaves worn by Adam and Eve in popular pictures of the two of them in paradise. |
| <i>The bottom of the pool</i> | |
| <i>Red-winged ravens</i> | |
| <i>The black snake</i> | |



In 2002, Dai Sijie adapted his own novel into a screenplay. This scene pictures Luo, played by Chen Kun and the Little Seamstress, played by Zhou Xun, swimming together in the secluded pool.

Quotation Bank

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

| | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>We were seduced, overwhelmed, spellbound by the mystery of the outside world, especially the world of women, love, and sex.... (p101)</i></p> | <p>The narrator describes the enthralling effect of reading books that were censored under the policies of the Cultural Revolution. The language he uses, such as ‘seduced’ reveal the great temptation to read censored material. The narrator uses a pattern of three which creates the effect that books have cast a spell over him.</p> |
| <p><i>She did not seem as tired as her friend – quite the contrary. She was brimming with energy, and clambered among the surrounding rocks. (p127)</i></p> | <p>The old miller is the first to notice the Little Seamstress’ transformation, although he does not recognise the significance of his observation. Her energy contrasts with Luo’s sleepiness to suggest that she is, in some ways, outgrowing her supposed teacher. In this way, the novel implies that education can have unintended consequences that teachers cannot always foresee.</p> |
| <p><i>Before, I had no idea that you could take on the role of a completely different person, actually become that person – a rich lady, for example – and still be your own self. (135)</i></p> | <p>Acting out a scene from <i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i> was the seamstress’ first time acting or pretending, emphasising how restricted her life had been up to this point. This opens her eyes to the possibility of living a different kind of life and foreshadows the ending of the novel. Luo, focused as he is on his own purgatory, doesn’t notice the profound the effect of this scene on the Little Seamstress and afterwards he simply goes back to playing the key ring game.</p> |
| <p><i>Based on your own reading of Part 3 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:</i></p> | |
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