

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAI SIJIE

Dai Sijie's parents were medical professionals in Sichuan Province. As an only child, Dai would've been excused from Mao's "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" program, which sought to "re-educate" young students by sending them to work and learn from the rural peasants. Dai chose to participate, however, and he cites the allure of rigorous training as his reasoning. His experience being sent to live among peasants during the Cultural Revolution was the inspiration for *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, which is semi-autobiographical. After returning from his re-education, he taught high school in Chengdu and studied art history at Sichuan University before receiving a scholarship in 1984 to study film in France. In France, he directed several films before turning to writing. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* was his first novel, and it won five French literary awards. It has been translated into 25 languages as of 2017. Dai lives in Paris and writes primarily in French, though he does possess a Chinese passport and can travel to and from China freely.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chairman Mao Zedong began the Cultural Revolution in 1966 with the intent to assert communism as the primary ideology of China, while doing away with anything western or traditional. Within months, schools were closed and students at Tsinghua University Middle School formed the first Red Guard group in support of Mao and his goals. Mao voiced support for the group, giving it legitimacy, and more Red Guard groups sprang up across the country with the goal of "making China red (Communist) from the inside out." These groups destroyed a number of historical and cultural sites and artifacts, including the gravesite of Confucius, and they burned entire libraries. Two years later, Mao began to disband the Red Guard and instead started the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement." While one of this movement's primary goals was to dilute the Red Guard's power by getting them out of the cities, individuals like Luo and the narrator (who weren't Red Guard members) suffered greatly as a result. Though the government considered them to be intellectuals, most of the young "intellectuals" sent to the countryside were too young to be truly well-educated. These dislocated youth were allowed to return home in the late 1970s. Though Mao declared that the Cultural Revolution ended in 1969, its policies continued for several years. Reformers began to dismantle the policies in 1976.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress is an example of scar literature, a Chinese literary movement that developed after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. Its name comes from the 1978 short story "The Scar" by Lu Xinhua. The genre consists of the stories of those "intellectuals" who were re-educated during the Cultural Revolution, and much of the work is autobiographical or semi-autobiographical. A notable example of scar literature is the autobiography *Mao's Last Dancer* (2003) by Li Cunxin, an Australian ballet dancer who was originally educated in the early 1970s in a Chinese dance academy. Literature is centrally important to *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, and most of the novels that Luo and the narrator find in Four-Eyes' suitcase are classic French works from the 19th century. Honoré de Balzac's novels *Ursule Mirouët*, *Cousin Pons*, and [Père Goriot](#) belong to his 94-part series *La Comédie humaine*. Though *La Comédie humaine*'s female characters run the gamut from prostitutes to virtuous wives, Ursule Mirouët, in particular, is one of the series' most virtuous heroines. The narrator's favorite novel from the suitcase, *Jean-Christophe*, is the first of a four-volume series by Romain Rolland. Of course, in the world of Dai's novel, all of these books are forbidden due to censorship by the Chinese government. A number of other novels from around the world similarly explore the consequences of censorship, ranging from Ray Bradbury's [Fahrenheit 451](#) to Salman Rushdie's [Haroun and the Sea of Stories](#). Though Mikhail Bulgakov's [The Master and Margarita](#) is infinitely more fantastical than *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, it too tackles the relationship between Communism and censorship.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (originally published in French as Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise)
- **When Written:** late 1990s
- **Where Written:** France
- **When Published:** 2000 in France; first English publication in 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, Post-Tiananmen
- **Genre:** Semi-Autobiographical; Historical Fiction; Scar Literature
- **Setting:** Phoenix of the Sky mountain in Sichuan province, China, 1972-73
- **Climax:** When the Little Seamstress leaves the mountain for the city
- **Antagonist:** Chairman Mao and his oppressive communist

government; the village headman

- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by the unnamed narrator. There are short interludes narrated by the Little Seamstress, Luo, and the miller.

EXTRA CREDIT

Film Censorship. Dai Sijie directed the 2002 film version of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* himself. Though the Chinese government granted Dai permission to film near where he himself was re-educated, China banned the finished film from being screened in the country.



PLOT SUMMARY

Luo and the narrator arrive at the mountain Phoenix of the Sky, a dizzyingly tall and extremely rural mountain near the Chinese border with Tibet. The village headman wants to burn the narrator's violin, but Luo explains to the headman that the narrator is a talented violinist and will play a sonata titled "Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao." The headman allows the narrator to keep the violin.

The narrator explains that he and Luo are considered intellectuals by the government and, because of this, they have been sent to the mountain to undergo re-education by the poor peasants. The boys perform backbreaking work and carry buckets of feces to the fields every day. The mountain is rainy and depressing, and the narrator plays his violin to try to lift his and Luo's spirits. He explains to the reader that because of his musical talent he may someday get to leave the mountain, but Luo's only talent is storytelling. The headman is the only one who appreciates Luo's talent, and he sends Luo and the narrator to the town of Yong Jing to see movies and then relate them back to the village.

The Little Seamstress is the "princess" of the mountain. One day, the narrator and Luo run into her father, the tailor, on a narrow mountain path, and the tailor teases the narrator about his violin. Several weeks later, Luo and the narrator stop by the tailor's house to ask the Little Seamstress to lengthen Luo's pants. Luo is obviously taken with the Little Seamstress, but when the narrator asks him about it, Luo says that the Little Seamstress isn't cultured enough for him.

The narrator and Luo are sent to work in the extremely dangerous coal mine for two months. After six weeks, Luo contracts malaria. The miners whip Luo to drive out the infection, and when they instruct the narrator to take over, the narrator discovers a letter from the Little Seamstress, saying that she's arranged for them to come to her village and perform an "oral cinema show." When they arrive and the Little Seamstress sees how ill Luo is, she cancels the show, tucks Luo into her bed, and applies a poultice to his arm. She calls four sorceresses to keep a vigil around Luo. When the sorceresses

begin to fall asleep, the Little Seamstress asks the narrator to tell them a story to keep them awake. Luo regains consciousness partway through the narrator's poor recitation and speaks the final heart-wrenching line of the story, sending the sorceresses into tears.

The next morning, Luo feels well enough to head home. He and the narrator stop when they see their friend Four-Eyes struggling with a water buffalo in a muddy field. Four-Eyes suggests that his friends rest at his house. When the narrator is searching for a sweater for Luo under Four-Eyes' bed, he finds a small, heavy suitcase. Four-Eyes won't say anything about it, but he looks panicked when Luo suggests that it contains books.

One snowy day in spring, Luo and the narrator go to see Four-Eyes, who has recently lost his glasses but is still attempting to work. Luo offers to help Four-Eyes finish his work in exchange for a book. Four-Eyes refuses, but is unable to complete his task. Luo and the narrator help him, and he gives them *Ursule Mirouët* by Balzac. Luo stays up all night reading and leaves in the morning after giving the book to the narrator. The narrator reads all day and when he's done, he copies a passage from the novel onto the inside of his jacket. Luo returns early the next morning and tells the narrator that he and the Little Seamstress had sex for the first time.

Luo and the narrator return the novel to Four-Eyes, but he won't lend them any more books. One day, they find Four-Eyes boiling his clothes, and he tells his friends that he had the opportunity to get off the mountain by collecting folk songs from an old miller. He ruined the opportunity by offending the old man and got lice in the process. Four-Eyes promises the boys a book if they can successfully record the miller's songs. Luo and the narrator disguise themselves as soldiers and visit the miller. They join him in sucking on salty rocks, and the miller sings bawdy songs. When they present their work to Four-Eyes, Four-Eyes deems the songs "smutty rhymes." He decides to alter them, and the narrator punches Four-Eyes.

Luo, the narrator, and the Little Seamstress go to Yong Jing to see a film. At the hotel that night, they learn that a woman is on her way to retrieve her son from his re-education. The next day, while the narrator waits for his friends next to a path, the narrator meets this woman. She's Four-Eyes' mother, the poetess, and she says that Four-Eyes has gotten a job at a revolutionary journal. When she leaves and the narrator tells Luo and the Little Seamstress what he learned, the Little Seamstress suggests they steal the suitcase of books before Four-Eyes leaves.

Luo and the narrator fashion a master key to pick Four-Eyes' lock and plan to steal the books during the village's celebratory banquet. Four-Eyes' village's headman slaughters a buffalo, and he and Four-Eyes drink the animal's blood. Later, Luo and the narrator watch the festivities before breaking into Four-Eyes' house. They find the suitcase, which is full of translated

Western novels. When they try to leave through the window they find it locked. They hear Four-Eyes and the poetess returning to the house and hide under the beds. When Four-Eyes and his mother leave, Luo grabs the suitcase and they run away with it.

Four-Eyes never reports his missing books. The headman leaves for a party conference, and Luo and the narrator spend a month reading all the books in the suitcase. The narrator is most taken by the novel *Jean-Christophe*. Luo spends his days visiting the Little Seamstress and reading to her. When a storm ravages the mountain, it creates a dangerous path along the way that scares even the narrator, who isn't afraid of heights like Luo is.

When the headman returns, he's very angry because he received poor dental care in Yong Jing. He asks Luo to repair his bad tooth, since his father is a dentist, but Luo refuses. The tailor arrives in the village a few days later and decides to stay with Luo and the narrator. Before they go to bed the first night, the tailor asks the boys to tell him a story. The narrator begins to tell *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and the tailor is hooked. The telling takes nine nights. On the third, the narrator is interrupted by the headman, who accuses him of spreading reactionary trash. The headman threatens to take the narrator to the Public Security Office, but says that he'll leave the narrator alone if Luo can repair the headman's tooth. The tailor fashions a drill out of his sewing machine needle. The headman can't stand the pain of the makeshift drill, so Luo suggests they tie the headman down. The headman agrees, and the narrator works the treadle. He takes revenge on the headman by making the treadle go as slowly as possible.

The novel switches to passages of narration by other characters. The old miller narrates a story of coming upon Luo and the Little Seamstress having sex in a secluded pool. Then Luo narrates, saying he taught the Little Seamstress how to dive, and how she loved to dive for his key ring. He says that he has to leave for a month to sit at his mother's sickbed. The Little Seamstress takes over the narration and tells the narrator that Luo's stories made her want to dive. On the last day she and Luo went to the pool, they acted out a part of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and then she dove for Luo's keys. At the bottom of the pool she encountered a snake that bit her, and she left Luo's keys underwater.

Luo asks the narrator to keep an eye on the Little Seamstress while he's out of town with his sick mother. The narrator envisions himself as a "secret agent" and he mostly enjoys the task. He begins to take on household chores at the Seamstress's house and finds that he's very attracted to her. As he's heading home one night, a band of the Little Seamstress's suitors attacks the narrator. They discover his Balzac novel, but the narrator escapes with only a bruised ear. That night, the narrator dreams about the gang of suitors cutting his ear off and the Little Seamstress rescuing him. He masturbates

thinking about her.

The next day, the Little Seamstress tells the narrator she's pregnant. The narrator explains that being an unwed mother is illegal, abortion is illegal, and getting married before age 25 is illegal. The narrator goes to Yong Jing to try to get help from the gynecology department at the hospital. The female patients yell at the narrator and he spends two days trying unsuccessfully to learn how to procure an abortion. On the third day, he decides to try to get help from the Christian preacher, who sweeps the streets. The narrator learns that the preacher is in the hospital. At the hospital, the narrator sits with the preacher and the preacher's family, who try to record the preacher's last words. The narrator catches a glimpse of the gynecologist and follows the doctor into an exam room. He offers the gynecologist a novel by Balzac in exchange for the abortion. The Little Seamstress's abortion is the next Thursday. It's successful, and the narrator gives the gynecologist *Ursule Mirouët* as well as *Jean-Christophe*. The Little Seamstress buys tangerines for the preacher, who died days earlier, and puts them on his grave.

The narrator jumps forward to himself and Luo, drunk and laughing, burning the banned novels. He explains that the Little Seamstress left suddenly after deciding to become a city girl. In the time leading up to her departure, she cut her hair into a bob, asked the tailor to buy her white shoes, and altered a jacket for herself. The result was modern and stylish, and Luo decided that reading to her had paid off. The narrator says that he and Luo didn't realize then that the final aspect of the Little Seamstress's transformation hadn't happened yet. A month later, the narrator and Luo are working in the fields when they hear a commotion in the village. The tailor is in the village, and he tells the boys that the Little Seamstress left for the city. Luo and the narrator run down the mountain in pursuit of the Little Seamstress. After two hours, the narrator spots the Little Seamstress sitting by the graveyard. He stops and watches Luo reunite with her. The narrator watches as the two begin talking and he hears Balzac's name. He feels betrayed that the Little Seamstress didn't tell him she was leaving. The seamstress gets up and resumes her march down the mountain. The narrator calls after her, but she keeps running. Luo tells the narrator that the Little Seamstress said that she learned from Balzac that her beauty is a treasure, and she's going to the city to try her luck.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator is a 17-year-old boy who has been sent from his hometown to a mountain in rural China to be re-educated in the ways of peasant life. His re-education has been decreed by the communist government as part of the Cultural Revolution, an effort to eliminate intellectuals and elevate the

working class and peasants. The narrator, though he has only completed middle school and has never read anything besides communist texts, is considered to be an intellectual because his educated parents have been labeled enemies of the state. Because of who his parents are, the narrator's chances of returning from re-education are three in a thousand. The narrator is extremely loyal to his best friend, Luo, who was sent with him to the mountain. Upon learning that their friend Four-Eyes brought a suitcase of banned novels to the mountain, the narrator and Luo become obsessed with western literature and go to great lengths to gain possession of the suitcase. The narrator is particularly inspired by the novel *Jean-Christophe*, which helps him to develop his own personal philosophy that champions individuals who stand up to take individual action against the world. Despite this inspiration, the narrator situates himself as a passive observer to the relationship between Luo and the Little Seamstress (a beautiful village girl with whom the narrator is also in love). Out of loyalty to Luo, he never tries to win the Little Seamstress for himself, and he risks his safety to arrange a dangerous illegal abortion for her. However, when the Little Seamstress betrays him by not telling him she's leaving the mountain, the narrator realizes that friendship needs loyalty that flows in both directions.

Luo – Luo is the narrator's best friend. They've been friends their whole lives, as they grew up next door to each other in the city of Chengdu. Luo is sent to the mountain to undergo re-education with the narrator, but life on the mountain makes him very depressed; he battles insomnia and moments of deep desperation. His chances of getting off the mountain are even slimmer than the narrator's because his father, the dentist, is serving time in prison. The narrator claims that Luo possesses no useful skills, but Luo is a skilled storyteller. He performs "oral cinema shows" for the village headman, in which he sees a film and then recites the film's story for the village, making his story last the length of the actual film. This earns Luo and the narrator a reprieve from their manual labor, as the process of seeing a film entails a four-day round trip journey to the city of Yong Jing and the headman agrees to pay the boys for their time. Luo is often selfish (when the boys obtain their first novel, there's no question that Luo will read it first) and convinced of his superiority. Luo is quite taken with Balzac's novels, and he sees that Balzac's work has a transformative effect on his girlfriend, the Little Seamstress. Though Luo loves the Little Seamstress, he's patronizing towards her, believing that she's uncultured and less intelligent than he is. By reading Balzac to her, Luo intends to make the Little Seamstress cultured enough to be worthy of his affections, but his education has an unintended effect: she gains the confidence and vision to leave the mountain for good by herself. Distraught, Luo burns the beloved novels in an emotional and drunken frenzy.

The Little Seamstress – The Little Seamstress is the "princess of Phoenix mountain" and the teenage daughter of the tailor.

She's beautiful and has a number of suitors on the mountain. Though she's a "simple mountain girl" and nearly illiterate, she tells Luo that she loves talking with people from the city, which shows her curiosity. Over the course of her romantic relationship with Luo, he reads her novels by Balzac, which she adores. The Little Seamstress finds out that she's pregnant with Luo's child while Luo is away from the mountain, and the narrator arranges for her to have an illegal abortion in Yong Jing. In the months after her abortion, the Little Seamstress uses what she learns from Balzac's novels to transform herself into a stylish city girl: she cuts her hair into a bob, adopts a Chengdu accent, and makes herself a bra. She meticulously and secretly arranges to leave the mountain for the city, and cites a line from one of Balzac's novels when Luo tries to convince her to stay. Both Luo and the narrator see her departure as the ultimate betrayal, and the narrator, in particular, feels as though she selfishly abused his generosity and loyalty to her.

Four-Eyes – Four-Eyes is another young man undergoing re-education in a village on Phoenix of the Sky. He's the only one on the mountain who wears glasses, and he lives in constant fear that the peasants will never release him from the mountain to the life he loved at home. His parents are writers, and he shares their dream that he becomes a writer as well. As such, they provide him with a suitcase of banned western novels. Four-Eyes is generally suspicious of other people and he regularly behaves in ways that are purely self-serving. Luo and the narrator hear him admit that he only remains friends with Luo so he can someday call on the dentist, Luo's father, for dental work. Four-Eyes certainly doesn't believe in the ideals of the Communist government, though his self-serving nature means that he's more than willing to pretend to be revolutionary in order to escape the mountain. The hope that he might be able to escape the mountain brings his worst traits and habits to the forefront, as he tricks Luo and the narrator into collecting folk songs for him, refuses to compensate them as he promised he would, and then alters the folk songs to be more revolutionary.

The Village Headman – The headman is the most powerful person in the village where Luo and the narrator undergo their re-education. He has three blood spots in one eye and horrible teeth. He's a generally unpleasant person and loves power. As such, he's especially taken with Luo's **alarm clock**, since it allows him power over the villagers' schedules. He loves oral storytelling most of all, and is willing to break with communist ideals to allow Luo and the narrator to see films in Yong Jing and then perform "oral cinema shows" for the village.

The Tailor – As the only tailor on Phoenix of the Sky, the tailor is a revered figure. He travels to villages around the mountain to sew and leaves his daughter, the Little Seamstress, behind to work in their home shop. He's jovial and personable, and enjoys the narrator and Luo's stories. The Little Seamstress says that he behaves like a child and does whatever he wants.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Gynecologist – The gynecologist works at the district hospital in Yong Jing, splitting his time between gynecology and surgery. He's initially unwilling to perform an abortion for the Little Seamstress, but finally agrees to do so in exchange for one of the forbidden novels.

The Miller – The miller is famous throughout the region around Phoenix of the Sky for his extensive repertoire of folk songs. He's exceptionally poor, thin, and is always very drunk. His stomach undulates when he sings.

The Poetess – The poetess is Four-Eyes' mother. She's a very proper woman, is extremely condescending to people who aren't from the city, and she babies her 18-year-old son.

The Dentist – The dentist is Luo's father. He's been labeled an enemy of the state because he claims to have worked on Chairman Mao's teeth.

The Preacher – An old man who sweeps the streets of Yong Jing as punishment for being a Christian.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



EDUCATION, RE-EDUCATION, AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress takes place during China's "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside" movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which sought to "re-educate" young intellectuals by removing them from their urban homes and sending them to rural areas to work and learn from the peasants. The narrator states that Chairman Mao Zedong's reasons for sending Chinese youth to the countryside were somewhat unclear, as individuals like Luo and the narrator, whom the Chinese government classified as "intellectuals," weren't intellectuals by any stretch of the imagination—they had actually only completed a middle school education. With this cruel irony front and center, the novel sets out to explore what education means when knowledge itself is stifled, and what the consequences are of trying to mandate how individuals and populations behave and think.

The peasants in charge of Luo and the narrator's re-education are mostly illiterate. They live simple lives and perform backbreaking work; in short, they are exactly what the communist regime wants the population to be like. Though Luo is obviously against the government's idea of re-education, he wishes to perform his own brand of re-education on the Little

Seamstress and transform her from a beautiful but simple country girl into a cultured young woman worthy of his affections. This, of course, backfires when the Little Seamstress takes what she's learned from hearing Luo and the narrator read Balzac to her and decides to leave the mountain and Luo behind. The Little Seamstress undergoes the exact opposite of the government's idea of re-education, as do Luo and the narrator. Their exposure to banned Western literature provides them with ideas and goals that run completely counter to the communist project of the country.

Though the narrator, Luo, and Four-Eyes are the only official recipients of re-education in the novel, the narrator continues to suggest that the idea of re-education isn't unique to them. The entire mountain is in the process of its own form of re-education, as it once thrived on the opium trade and, thanks to the Cultural Revolution, is now forced to embrace the idealized life of the poor, noble peasant. While the narrator doesn't go into great detail about what the villagers' lives were like before the Cultural Revolution, he suggests that they weren't thrilled to switch from cultivating opium to other crops. The villagers never fully bought into the ideals espoused by the government, as illustrated by their "quiet anarchy" when the village headman leaves for a month. Though the headman's motives aren't detailed, it's suggested that he cares more about maintaining and exerting his power than about either opium or enforcing communism in his village. Essentially, he doesn't seem to care *where* his power comes from; he just cares that he has it. This shows that the images of both re-education and the "noble peasant" are just that: images, not actual reality. The villagers, and the headman in particular, seem far more committed to obtaining and keeping power than they are to ideals espoused by the government. Though the Cultural Revolution was intended to shape the Chinese way of life by educating or re-educating citizens to fit a certain ideal, the novel suggests that attempting to shape people to embody a particular vision is a difficult or impossible task, and that controlling what happens as a result of another person's education is equally impossible.



COMING OF AGE

At its most basic level, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* tells the coming of age stories of Luo, the Little Seamstress, and the narrator. While the three engage in the perfectly normal process of testing boundaries and questioning the truth of what they've been taught by parents and the government, the particularly oppressive nature of the Cultural Revolution makes this process significantly more dangerous and high-stakes for them. Because Luo and the narrator's parents have been labeled enemies of the state, the chances that Luo and the narrator will be allowed to return to their families is three in a thousand. This creates a great deal of anxiety for them around their coming of age, as their time on the mountain doesn't

necessarily have an end date. The boys find themselves in a state of limbo, which leads them to grasp for ways to try to control their futures. As a violinist, the narrator knows that if he becomes accomplished enough, he could possibly have a future playing communist music. Luo, however, has no such talent to get him away from the mountain. Instead, he turns to romance with the Little Seamstress as preparation for the future, as the narrator indicates that Luo marrying the Little Seamstress is a distinct possibility. Luo views his secret rendezvous with the Little Seamstress as a mental and emotional escape. However, even though knowing he'll marry the Little Seamstress makes Luo slightly happier, it can't replace the hurt of being denied the future he once thought he would have.

The narrator and Luo's coming of age begins to take off when they're introduced to the possibility of reading literature. The narrator tells the reader that all literature, western as well as Chinese, had been banned at the start of the Cultural Revolution. By the time he and Luo learned to read, the only thing to read was Mao's "Little Red Book." He describes the thought of literature as being intoxicating: just hearing about it is enough to conjure the idea perfectly in one's mind. All the novels in Four-Eyes' suitcase open the boys' eyes to the western world and to adult concepts like love and sex. Notably, Luo and the Little Seamstress have sex for the first time after Luo reads Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët*, which suggests that western literature paved the way for his and the Little Seamstress's sexual coming of age.

The narrator develops his own unique view on life and the world around him after reading the novel *Jean-Christophe* by Romain Rolland. *Jean-Christophe* is particularly intoxicating to the narrator because it features a character who takes "free individual action against the whole world"—an idea that goes against every communist teaching the narrator has ever heard. This leads the narrator to wish for something that is wholly his own, not something shared with Luo as most of their possessions are. This idea of independence as a marker for maturity applies to the Little Seamstress, as well. Thanks to what she learns from western literature via the narrator and Luo, she finds the power within herself to actually take individual action against the world by leaving the mountain and her lover behind. Though love, sex, and education are some of the first ways in which the characters begin their coming of age processes, the novel suggests that the final tipping point to maturity occurs when a character seeks independence as a consequence of what they've learned from love or literature.



STORYTELLING, CENSORSHIP, AND POWER

The Cultural Revolution sought to eliminate any kind of art, music, or literature that didn't fully support the political aims of the government. The narrator says that both western and classic Chinese literature are banned,

and some works of music have been altered to pay homage to Mao. With this backdrop, the novel explores how storytelling and censorship work together and in opposition to each other, particularly showing how storytelling can give individuals power, and censorship can enhance the power and allure of works of literature.

China's strict censorship of artistic expression and intellectualism suggests, first of all, that there is value and power in art, music, and storytelling—if there weren't, such types of expression wouldn't be a threat to the Chinese government's aims of a fully communist society. Artistic and literary pursuits, particularly when they shed light on other parts of the world or champion individualism, take power away from the government by making it clear to the people that there are other ways of living, and that people who live differently might be happy. This is best illustrated by the narrator's reaction to reading *Jean-Christophe*. The narrator takes from the novel that individuals who challenge the world are good and noble, and that staying alive to challenge the world is of the utmost importance. This point of view gives the narrator the courage to arrange the abortion for the Little Seamstress. Forbidden literature, then, is shown to lead directly to forbidden action.

Throughout the novel, characters use works of literature as currency. The narrator and Luo trade physical labor for one of Four-Eyes' novels, and later, the narrator trades two novels to the gynecologist to pay for the Little Seamstress' illegal abortion. By ascribing this kind of value to literature, the novel shows that literature isn't just powerful in an emotional sense; it has real material value. Notably, literature as currency works in the narrator's society because banning them has made them all the more valuable to those who don't completely buy into the Party ideals. Essentially, by attempting to disempower the population by depriving them of this literature, the government gave those who do have access to the literature a great deal of power.

The novel itself contradicts the narrator's initial claim that storytelling, while a charming talent, isn't one that's truly valued or worthwhile in communist China; the government's insistence on censorship makes that very clear from the beginning. In addition, the village headman obviously values storytelling as entertainment; he's willing to pay Luo and the narrator for four days' worth of manual labor so they can instead go see and recite films for the village. Similarly, Luo and the narrator collect the miller's folk songs for Four-Eyes so that he can land a job at a revolutionary journal. Finally, because the novel is based on the author's actual experiences of re-education, the novel itself stands as proof that storytelling and literature, particularly literature that challenges censorship and gives voice to individuals, is worthwhile and powerful.



FRIENDSHIP AND LOYALTY

The narrator is clear that he and Luo are best friends and always have been. They grew up in apartments next door to each other, watched their parents publically humiliated at political rallies, and are sent together to Phoenix mountain for re-education. However, what the narrator says about the strength and depth of his friendship with Luo is complicated by the questionable ways that Luo treats the narrator. As the narrator navigates the trials and tribulations of being Luo's friend, the novel suggests that loyalty isn't as simple or as straightforward as the narrator would like to think.

Though the narrator never says so outright, Luo is a somewhat difficult person to be friends with. He's occasionally violent and often selfish, getting first dibs on Balzac's books from Four-Eyes' suitcase. As a result of this, the narrator situates himself as more of a sidekick to Luo than an equal. Further, the narrator seldom takes issue with this state of affairs, suggesting that their relationship is built on unequal footing. The narrator's style of storytelling reinforces the idea that he's a mere sidekick or onlooker to the story, and that (in his mind at least) the story itself is really about Luo and the Little Seamstress, and the ways in which the narrator supports them and their relationship. He gives this impression by consistently re-conceptualizing events to emphasize others rather than himself, as when he revises his initial mention of "his [the narrator's] tormenters" to "the Little Seamstress's swarm of disappointed suitors." This shifts the focus away from him and makes it clear that he believes his own existence is inconsequential in relation to those around him. This habit of putting others first, both in the narrator's actions and his words, becomes its own way of showing loyalty.

The narrator's idea of loyalty becomes even more complicated when Luo leaves the mountain temporarily and charges the narrator with watching over the Little Seamstress in his absence. With Luo gone, the narrator can no longer ignore the fact that he himself is in love with the Little Seamstress. He transfers his physical displays of loyalty and friendship from Luo to the Little Seamstress, helping her with household chores and painting her fingernails for her. Initially, this leads to what the narrator deems a betrayal of sorts, as he masturbates thinking about the Little Seamstress, and in his sexual frustration, he begins to brainstorm ways to break his promise to Luo. However, the narrator's loyal nature returns when the Little Seamstress confides in him the following day that she's pregnant with Luo's child. The narrator takes it upon himself to talk her out of inducing a miscarriage with herbs or bodily harm, and procures an illegal abortion for her in Yong Jing.

At the end of the novel, the narrator finally suggests that he views loyalty as being transactional, as he's angry with the Little Seamstress for leaving without telling him. The narrator feels he's owed this information, since he arranged her abortion,

which he sees as the sole reason the Little Seamstress can even consider leaving her mountain home. He feels that the Little Seamstress owes him her life as she knows it, and he thus considers her leaving in secret to be the ultimate betrayal. This suggests that as the narrator grows up and comes of age, he begins to place more value on the loyalty that others show him, rather than simply effacing himself out of loyalty to others. While he still places himself in the role of mere spectator and supporting character to his friends' failing romance, his feelings of anger and betrayal suggest not only that he believes that he's deserving of loyalty, but that loyalty from both sides is a necessary element of an equal friendship.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LUO'S ALARM CLOCK

Luo's alarm clock, which features a tiny rooster that crows when the alarm sounds, is a forbidden object.

The alarm clock represents the bourgeois norms, such as timing the workday with a clock rather than with sunrise and sunset, that the Cultural Revolution was intended to quash. However, Luo's clock is small enough to escape being confiscated by the headman upon Luo's arrival in the village, and when the headman discovers its existence he finds it fascinating rather than repellent. The headman's unexpected fascination with the clock shows the ways in which the Cultural Revolution is failing in its ideals; instead of curing Luo and the narrator of their bourgeois upbringings, the re-education campaign brings intellectual and urban ideas to the countryside. Furthermore, the clock becomes a symbol of power—it gives the headman a reason to yell and display his leadership to the village, and Luo and the narrator use it to secretly give themselves power over their lives by changing the time on the clock to move the workday forward or back. Thus, this forbidden symbol of bourgeois life is a source of power for all who encounter it, which shows the disproportionate influence of ideas and objects that are intended to be suppressed.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* published in 2002.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ The peasants' faces, so grim a moment before, softened under the influence of Mozart's limpid music like parched earth under a shower, and then, in the dancing light of the oil lamp, they blurred into one.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Village Headman, Luo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6



Explanation and Analysis


The narrator is allowed to keep his violin and play for the villagers after Luo convinces the headman that the violin itself isn't a "bourgeois toy." As he plays, the narrator notes that, despite the government's insistence that all western music is evil, the opposite is actually true. The western music, though Luo has renamed it to pay homage to Chairman Mao, has a positive effect on the peasants. They find it pleasant, which begins to suggest that music (and artistic pursuits in general) can be universally appealing. Early on in the novel, this casts doubt on the integrity of the government's goal of Chinese cultural insulation, exposing this aim as misguided. This turn of events is also ironic and somewhat humorous. The narrator will later refer to these peasants as being charged with re-educating his soul, while this moment demonstrates that the narrator himself also has a role in educating the peasants.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ The sheer audacity of our trick did a lot to temper our resentment against the former opium growers who, now that they had been converted into "poor peasants" by the communist regime, were in charge of our re-education.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Village Headman, Luo

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis


The narrator describes the effects of turning Luo's alarm clock forwards or backwards to suit their needs or desires

on any given day. First, the trick itself gives Luo and the narrator a degree of power over their lives, as they can essentially control when their day starts and ends. This also certainly gives them a sense of superiority over the headman in particular; this is the headman's first experience with a clock, and he doesn't possess a clock of his own to check Luo's meddling.

The language that the narrator uses to describe the peasants continues to build the idea that, though the Cultural Revolution was intended to glorify these "poor peasants," the peasants themselves aren't necessarily willing participants in the Revolution. This again creates a sense of irony, as those who are in charge of instilling communist values in bourgeois youth might or might not actually have bought into those communist values themselves.

☞☞ The only thing Luo was really good at was telling stories. A pleasing talent to be sure, but a marginal one, with little future in it. Modern man has moved beyond the age of the Thousand-and-One-Nights, and modern societies everywhere, whether socialist or capitalist, have done away with the old storytellers—more's the pity.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Village Headman, Luo

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 18



Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains to the reader that he might be able to return to the city because he can play the violin, while Luo is likely doomed to spend his life on the mountain because his only talent is storytelling. Though the narrator's tone indicates a sadness that storytellers aren't valued in the modern world, the novel itself refutes the idea that storytellers aren't valuable. The novel's very structure elevates the narrator to a high status, as the reader is asked to take his story at his word. Throughout the novel too, Luo's stories and his skill at telling them achieve concrete goals: he makes old crones cry, gets paid to watch films, and he can be credited with introducing the Little Seamstress to western literature. Further, though the novel itself can certainly be called "pleasing," it does much more than simply entertain. Because it explores complex themes and concepts, and asks the reader to form opinions about those concepts, it works as a teaching tool.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ She's not civilized, at least not enough for me!

Related Characters: Luo (speaker), The Little Seamstress, The Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Luo and the narrator walk home from visiting the Little Seamstress for the first time. Though Luo is obviously very taken with the Little Seamstress, he believes her to be too uncivilized to be worthy of his affections. This sets the stage for how Luo views and conducts his relationship with the Little Seamstress. Her lack of "civilization" allows him to think of himself as superior to her, rather than equal, and he condescends to her throughout the novel. The fact that he turns himself into her teacher and mentor, thereby performing his own brand of re-education on her, shows one flaw of the re-education program. Instead of bringing peasant life to the bourgeois youth of the city, it seems that Luo and the narrator are bringing bourgeois life to the peasants—peasants whom the Chinese government believes should be the model for communist China.

was "nothing left" to read shows how poorly the narrator thinks of Communism—he thinks that literature by communist leaders, even if they are Western, isn't worth reading. This continues to suggest that, though the Cultural Revolution was supposed to unite China, it's obviously not working the way that the government intended.

☝ Just as your parents and mine always dreamed that we'd be doctors like them, Four-Eyes's parents probably wanted their son to be a writer. They must have thought it would be good for him to read books, even if he had to do so in secret.

Related Characters: Luo (speaker), The Poetess, Four-Eyes, The Narrator

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 52



Explanation and Analysis

Luo and the narrator discuss why Four-Eyes' parents trusted him to keep a suitcase of banned books safe. This begins to hint at the power the Cultural Revolution ascribes to literature, as well as the danger of literature—to both the aims of the regime, and to individuals who possess forbidden books. While the novel suggests that literature can be powerful in any time or place, it's particularly powerful at this moment in China because of its scarcity. Furthermore, Four-Eyes' parents evidently feel so strongly about literature and intellectual pursuits, they're willing to risk their own welfare as well as that of their son so that he can continue his education in secret. This also continues to poke holes in the idealistic goals of the Revolution, as it's obvious that Four-Eyes' parents are unsupportive of the government's censorship.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ All this talk of literature was getting me down. We had been so unlucky. By the time we had finally learnt to read properly, there had been nothing left for us to read. For years the "Western literature" sections of the bookshops were devoted to the complete works of the Albanian Communist leader Enver Hoxha...

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Four-Eyes, Luo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Luo and the narrator believe that Four-Eyes has a suitcase full of forbidden books. They spend their time wondering what particular books might be in the suitcase, though it's a depressing conversation. The narrator's explanation shows just how tightly Mao's regime sought to control the existence of literature. In addition, the statement that there

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝ In spite of my complete ignorance of that distant land called France (I had heard Napoleon mentioned by my father a few times, that was all), Ursule's story rang as true as if it had been about my neighbors.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis



The narrator reads Balzac's novel *Ursule Mirouët* and finds it to be extremely relatable, despite the fact that the time and place of the novel are entirely foreign to the narrator. Again, this undermines the goals of the Mao regime, as the narrator's discovery shows that the rest of the world isn't evil; rather, stories are universal. This shows the power of literature.

As the narrator reads, his worldview widens, bringing about his coming of age. Part of growing up is discovering new ideas and perspectives, and particularly during this time, the narrator's coming of age is tied directly to his unwillingness to fully accept the government's goals for his re-education. In short, the fact that the narrator experiences the realization that the world isn't what the government would like him to think it is brings about growth and a sense of intellectual adulthood for the narrator.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ "This fellow Balzac is a wizard," he went on. "He touched the head of the mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed ... She ended up putting your wretched coat on (which looked very good on her, I must say). She said having Balzac's words next to her skin made her feel good, and also more intelligent."

Related Characters: Luo (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis


Luo tells the narrator about his experience reading an excerpt from *Ursule Mirouët* to the Little Seamstress. With this, Luo acknowledges fully the power of literature. Importantly, the power comes from literature's ability to appeal to a variety of different people from different educational backgrounds; in this case, it appeals to the Little Seamstress, who has very little education or experience outside of her village. The Little Seamstress also acknowledges the power of literature. In particular, it makes her feel more intelligent, which suggests that she believes that without access to education and literature specifically, people are unintelligent. It's unclear whether she already believed this or if Luo convinced her of this idea, but, regardless, it suggests the power dynamic between Luo and his lover, in which Luo has the power of a teacher and mentor, and the Little Seamstress is only a willing recipient

of his knowledge.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ What this gentleman is looking for is precisely that: the authentic, robustly primitive words of ancient ditties.

Related Characters: Luo (speaker), Four-Eyes, The Miller, The Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Luo explains to the miller that the disguised narrator is looking for authentic folk songs that support the ideas espoused by the revolutionary government. The language used to describe these "ancient ditties" and the power ascribed to them is humorous in light of what the folk songs actually are: raunchy, and decidedly not what the government wants to hear from its "noble peasants."

This suggests that the government, and particularly the literary journal that hires Four-Eyes, is trying to show that the peasants are fully in support of the Cultural Revolution. The literary journal seems to believe that the ideas of the peasants are fully and truly the same as the ideas of the government, but with a charming and primitive twist. The government is using the literary journal to try to create the façade of universality in the country, but the miller's songs show that this aim is deeply misguided and out of touch.

Part 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ The change he had undergone since receiving his mother's letter was truly remarkable. A few days before it would have been unthinkable for him to snap at us like this. I hadn't suspected that a tiny glimmer of hope for the future could transform someone so utterly.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Little Seamstress, Four-Eyes, The Miller, Luo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Four-Eyes isn't pleased with the songs that Luo and the narrator transcribed from the miller because they hurt his

chances of being hired by a revolutionary journal and getting off Phoenix mountain. Four-Eyes' extreme displeasure points first to how miserable re-education and life on the mountain are—the possibility of getting off the mountain is enough to turn Four-Eyes into an extremely selfish person. Further, the narrator seems to feel betrayed by Four-Eyes' transformation. He and Luo feel as though they've upheld their end of the bargain, and Four-Eyes' unwillingness to follow through on his end is, at this point, a serious betrayal of the friendship between the three.

This also suggests early on that Luo and the narrator will underestimate the power of hope later in the novel. They never see it coming that the Little Seamstress wants to leave the mountain and use what she's learned. Their sense of betrayal at her leaving is similar to their sense of betrayal here. Because they're so caught up in their own limbo of life on the mountain, they don't understand that others around them are capable of seeing escape routes and using them. The Little Seamstress uses Balzac novels as her escape, as they teach her that a life in the city is a possibility for her.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ But I shouldn't let it worry you too much. Right now, ignorance is in fashion, but one day the need for good doctors will be recognized once more. Besides, Chairman Mao is bound to need your father's services again.

Related Characters: The Poetess (speaker), Four-Eyes, The Dentist, Luo, The Narrator

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As the poetess resumes her ascent of the mountain, she tells the narrator (who is pretending to be Luo) that the fervor of the Revolution will pass. This suggests that the repression of culture and intellectualism is a phase, not a lasting state of affairs, which continues to break down the government's idealistic goal of having all its people believe fully in the Revolution. It also suggests that healthcare, like literature, is a universal need or desire; it's not something that the government can deny its people access to forever.

In an overarching way, the poetess' statement also shows that she's looking to the future with the belief that she, and the country as a whole, will get through this difficult time. Unlike the narrator and Luo, whose lives are in limbo on the mountain, she's able to conceptualize what her life will look

like in the future. For her, the future looks positive; for Luo and the narrator, they can't possibly conceive of a way that they'll ever get off the mountain. This illustrates the narrator's (and Luo's) youth, as it suggests that this ability to see forward like the poetess does is something that comes with age, maturity, and the experience of simply having watched a variation of this cycle happen before.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ "So are you weeping tears of joy?" I said.
"No. All I feel is loathing."
"Me too. Loathing for everyone who kept these books from us."

Related Characters: Luo, The Narrator (speaker), Four-Eyes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator and Luo open Four-Eyes' suitcase of forbidden novels and proceed to steal it. Their emotions here illustrate the negative consequences of censorship: it results in crimes and acts of betrayal, like this theft.

Luo and the narrator don't just loathe Four-Eyes, who has kept these books from them—even more, they loathe the government that banned the books in the first place. On some level, the boys also feel betrayed by the government, and by Four-Eyes. They see that literature and exposure to the different perspectives found in literature is an integral part of life and education, and they see it as a heinous crime to prevent people from reading.

☝☝ He shut the suitcase again and, resting one hand on the lid like a Christian taking a solemn oath, he declared: "With these books I shall transform the Little Seamstress. She'll never be a simple mountain girl again."

Related Characters: Luo (speaker), Four-Eyes, The Little Seamstress, The Narrator

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis


Luo and the narrator decide to steal the entire suitcase of

books rather than just a few, and Luo voices his plan to educate the Little Seamstress. Though at this point Luo seems fully committed to his goal, he grossly underestimates the consequences of re-educating the Little Seamstress with western literature. Luo later finds the Little Seamstress's transformation attractive and positive, but it never occurs to him that she might do things with her education that he cannot control. Interestingly, this is true of Luo and the narrator's re-education, as well as that of the Little Seamstress. Though the narrator and Luo were supposed to learn the virtues and values of the noble peasants, they obtained a far more extensive education in banned subjects like sex and Western literature, and took action based on their new forbidden knowledge. This suggests that education can shape students in ways their teachers hadn't anticipated.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ In the ensuing political vacuum our village lapsed into quiet anarchy, and Luo and I stopped going to work in the fields without the villagers—themselves unwilling converts from opium farmers to guardians of our souls—raising the slightest objection.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Village Headman, Luo

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis



While the village headman is away for a Party conference, Luo and the narrator stop going to work and the villagers don't raise a fuss about it. With this, the narrator continues to develop the idea that the peasants who are supposed to be re-educating the bourgeois youth by extolling simple peasant life aren't exactly proponents of their own way of life. They, like Luo and the narrator, are undergoing their own form of re-education as they're forced to take on the role of the "noble peasants."

This passage also shows how much power the village headman has. While Luo and the narrator do on occasion manage to exert some degree of power over him, his presence—and his implied belief in communism—is clearly the only reason that the villagers are living and working as they are. This makes the government's hold over the beliefs and goings-on of the village particularly tenuous, since it's evident that there's only one person in the village who truly

believes in and enforces the government's project.

☞ But Jean-Christophe, with his fierce individualism utterly untainted by malice, was a salutary revelation. Without him I would never have understood the splendor of taking free and independent action as an individual.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator reads the novel *Jean-Christophe* by Romain Rollande, which introduces him to this decidedly not-Communist idea of independent action. This discovery stands as one of the most galvanizing moments of the narrator's coming of age, as it's at this point that the narrator begins to develop his own personal guiding philosophy. By implying that a true marker of maturity is independence, the author indicates that communal actions and beliefs are childish and immature. Interestingly, though the narrator does take individual action in the remainder of the novel, he only does so in the service of others. He arranges the Little Seamstress's abortion and abandons his work to chase Luo and the Little Seamstress down the mountain, but he doesn't necessarily do either of those things in service of himself. This shows that, though the narrator moves towards maturity by developing this philosophy, he still has a long way to go towards actually reaching the final iteration of what the philosophy means.

Part 3, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ It would evidently take more than a political regime, more than dire poverty to stop a woman from wanting to be well dressed: it was a desire as old as the world, as old as the desire for children.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Luo, The Tailor

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

When the tailor comes to Luo and the narrator's village, he



asks to stay with Luo and the narrator. As such, the boys get to see the inner workings of a tailor's workshop and watch the women dream about their new wardrobes. This realization continues the novel's overarching project of showing how many things, like literature and the desire for clothing, are universal ideas that aren't necessarily altered by political differences or socioeconomic status. Rather, these universal things transcend a person's place in the world.

This also continues to build up to the Little Seamstress's sudden departure from the mountain. Because the narrator learns here that it's a universal desire for women to have nice clothes, he doesn't find the Little Seamstress's out-of-character and impractical clothing choices worthy of notice. Thus, even as the tailor is broadening the narrator's worldview, the idea of universality will also later blind the narrator to nuance.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ 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.

Related Characters: The Little Seamstress (speaker), The Narrator, Luo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

The Little Seamstress and Luo are acting out a scene from *The Count of Monte Cristo* at their secluded pool. This seems to be the Little Seamstress's first experience with pretending or acting, which illustrates how stifled her life and her educational experiences have been up to this point. This realization then becomes a part of her education and her coming of age, as she begins to see that people can be many things at once in their minds. This then opens the door for her to discover that she can be many things throughout her life; particularly, that she's not stuck being the tailor's daughter on the mountain for the rest of her life. She has the power to decide to pretend to be (or to actually become) someone else, while still holding the identity of the tailor's daughter within her.

Part 3, Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ I couldn't resist taking slight liberties, adding bits here and there by way of a personal touch to make the story more interesting to her. When I felt good old Balzac was running out of steam I would contribute little inventions of my own, or even insert whole scenes from another novel.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Little Seamstress

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator reads to the Little Seamstress in Luo's absence, altering the tales as he sees fit. This can be read in several ways. First, it demonstrates that the narrator is achieving mastery in storytelling, as he's able to not just identify which parts of a novel might be boring, but also to invent reasonable alternatives for Balzac's plotlines. This shows the effect of the narrator's own education in western literature, and shows that he himself is becoming a greater storyteller than he ever gave himself credit for. This process can also be seen as a way for the narrator to show off for the Little Seamstress. He alludes early on that Luo's skill at storytelling was attractive to the Little Seamstress. Here, the narrator can use a skill that previously only Luo had to attempt to woo the Little Seamstress. Overall, the narrator's method of storytelling allows him to feel powerful. He gets to control the trajectory of Balzac's story, as well as show off for his forbidden love interest.

☞ It was not long before I took it upon myself, out of a sense of courtesy and respect for womanhood that I had learned from Balzac, to relieve the Little Seamstress of her laundering duties...

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Little Seamstress

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis



As the narrator spends more time reading Balzac novels to the Little Seamstress, he begins to gladly take on more of her household duties. When the narrator mentions the

"courtesy and respect for womanhood," it shows how the narrator's exposure to Western literature is teaching him about women, particularly in ways that the Communist government wouldn't find appropriate.

It's important to note that the narrator and the reader are fully aware at this point that the narrator is in love with the Little Seamstress. However, notice that the narrator doesn't insert himself as a suitor; he only makes himself her helper and accomplice. This follows the narrator's trend of situating himself as an outside observer or a sidekick to others, rather than valuing himself as a full participant in his and his friends' lives. Further, it ultimately proves ineffective—helping the Little Seamstress procure the abortion didn't make her love him or treat him as any more than a platonic friend.

Although illiterate, my tormenters, or rather the Little Seamstress's swarm of disappointed suitors, were flabbergasted by the sight of this recondite object: a book.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Little Seamstress

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator leaves the Little Seamstress's village one night, he's attacked by a group of young men who are irritated with Luo and the narrator's monopoly on the Little Seamstress. In the ensuing scuffle, the narrator's Balzac novel is exposed for all to see.

This point is one in which the narrator's habit of situating himself as a supporting character rather than the protagonist of his own story is extremely apparent. Though these young men are undeniably tormenting the narrator, he chooses to re-conceptualize this event to make it about the Little Seamstress instead of about himself. This habit robs the narrator of power, and makes it so that (in the narrator's mind, at least) he's not in control of any of these events. The way the narrator phrases it, this attack could have happened to any young man who won the Little Seamstress's affection and it wouldn't have made any difference. Essentially, by engaging in this mental sidestep, the narrator forfeits any agency over his life and what happens to him because he situates himself as an observer and a sidekick.

Part 3, Chapter 8 Quotes

“ I felt as if it were my child that she was carrying, as if it had been me and not Luo making love to her under the majestic ginkgo tree and in the limpid water of the secret pool. I was deeply moved; she was my soul mate and I was ready to spend the rest of my life taking care of her, content even to die a bachelor if that would help.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Luo, The Little Seamstress

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

The Little Seamstress confides in the narrator that she's pregnant with Luo's child, and the narrator becomes extremely (but secretly) emotional about it. The narrator's romantic thought process here shows first how much he does indeed care for the Little Seamstress—he feels willing to dedicate his life to caring for her at the cost of his own fulfillment and happiness. He also feels as though the two of them have a deep emotional connection, a belief that the Little Seamstress will shatter later in the novel.

The narrator's language also shows the effects of the novels he's been reading. While an unintended pregnancy can exist in fiction as a romantic occurrence, the way that the narrator goes on to discuss the actual challenges of the Little Seamstress's pregnancy shows that her pregnancy is anything but romantic. The fact that the narrator's initial reaction is to romanticize the pregnancy shows both his youth and inexperience, as well as the way he's learning to romanticize hardships as a result of his exposure to literature.

“ There was nowhere for them to go, for 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Luo, The Little Seamstress

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

After describing the challenges that Luo and the Little Seamstress would face should the Little Seamstress decide to continue her pregnancy, the narrator declares in this very romantic way that there's no way for them to possibly do so. This continues to illustrate the effect of literature on the narrator. Here, he's not just turning the unintended pregnancy into a romantic mishap; he's using actual literary characters to make sense of the situation.

The narrator's casting of himself as Man Friday again stands as an instance in which the narrator subsumes his own existence for that of others. Here, he demotes himself from being a "secret agent," a title which provided some degree of agency and self-sufficiency. By taking on the role of Man Friday, the narrator places himself once again in the role of sidekick and mere observer to his friends' lives.

●● It was insane, but the bourgeois intellectuals upon which the Communists had inflicted so much hardship were no less morally strict than their persecutors.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Gynecologist, The Little Seamstress

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator thinks that if his own father were to find him looking for an abortion for the Little Seamstress, he'd immediately disown the narrator without asking questions. With this realization, the narrator acknowledges that some of the ideals espoused by the Communist regime are shared by those on the other side. This shows that the novel's belief in universality extends to moral arenas; literature and music aren't the only things that are universal, and some universal things can be oppressive rather than emancipatory. This is a moment in which the narrator gains a more nuanced view of the world, which indicates his development and growing maturity. It also continues to suggest that the Cultural Revolution isn't just a fight between good and evil; rather, those on both sides can be wrong.

Part 3, Chapter 9 Quotes

●● 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?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Luo, The Little Seamstress

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator chases after Luo, who is racing down the mountain after the Little Seamstress. This is the first time that the narrator questions the reasoning behind his loyalty to his friend. Though the narrator has a natural tendency to be loyal and follow those around him, as he grows up and matures he begins to question this habit. Questioning it, and then demanding moments of independence, is one way that the narrator comes of age.

The narrator also shows that he's aware that he's romanticizing Luo and the Little Seamstress's relationship. His exposure to literature changes the way he thinks about events and causes him to discuss them in more literary terms, which is another way he shows his growing maturity. Significantly though, combining his newfound penchant for romanticizing events with a consideration of loyalty leads the narrator to actually accept that he does indeed play a very necessary role in the novel.

●● Although I was fully aware of my role as spectator, I felt just as betrayed as Luo, not by her decision to leave the mountain, but by the fact that she had not thought to tell me about it. I felt as if all the complicity we had shared in procuring the abortion had been wiped from her consciousness, as if I had never meant more to her than a friend of a friend, which was what I would remain forever.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Luo, The Little Seamstress

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

After an hours-long sprint down the mountain in pursuit of the Little Seamstress, the narrator stops and watches Luo

and the Little Seamstress reunite. Importantly, the narrator doesn't insist on playing a role in convincing the Little Seamstress to return to her village; he willingly sidelines himself. This is a continuation of the narrator's habit of subsuming his own desires and allowing others to get what they want. The narrator obviously has feelings for the Little Seamstress and wants her to return; he just chooses to not participate. His thought process also shows that he feels the Little Seamstress owes him loyalty after he arranged her

abortion. He sees that the Little Seamstress owes the narrator for the fact that she can even dream of leaving the mountain in the first place, as the narrator makes it very clear that she'd suffer major consequences for bearing a child as a teenager. Again, however, the narrator concludes by continuing to insist that he's not a part of the story. Regardless of the role he's played in the Little Seamstress's life, he doesn't see himself as truly a part of it, and therefore he won't take any action to convince her to stay.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

The village headman sits in the center of the house on stilts, inspecting the narrator's violin. The entire village looks on as the headman declares the violin a toy. The headman passes the violin to the villagers and deems it a "bourgeois toy," chilling the narrator and his friend, Luo. The room erupts with shouts to burn the violin, but Luo casually interjects that the violin is a musical instrument.

The headman passes the violin back to the narrator as Luo explains that the narrator is going to play a Mozart sonata. The narrator is terrified—all music by western composers has been banned for years. The headman asks what the song is called, and Luo says the song is called "Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao." The headman says that Mozart is always thinking of Chairman Mao, and Luo agrees. The narrator begins to play, and the villagers listen attentively. Luo lights a cigarette.

The narrator addresses the reader and explains that in 1968, Chairman Mao began a campaign to close universities and send the "young intellectuals" to the countryside for re-education by the peasants. He continues that Mao's motives were unclear, but that the narrator and Luo decided that Mao simply hated intellectuals. However, the fact that the narrator and Luo are considered intellectuals is ironic, given that they've only completed middle school by the time they're sent to the mountain in 1971. The narrator says that even in middle school, he and Luo learned nothing, as the official curriculum consisted solely of lessons on industry and agriculture. All books aside from Mao's Little Red Book were forbidden.

Luo and the narrator were deemed intellectuals because their parents had been labeled "enemies of the state." The narrator's parents were doctors; Luo's father was a famous dentist who claimed to have performed dental work on Mao, Mao's wife, and Jiang Jieshi, the prior president of China. Claiming to have worked on Mao's teeth was already a crime; saying in the same sentence that he'd worked on Jiang Jieshi's teeth only compounded the severity of the crime.

The narrator sets up first and foremost that there are major differences between himself and the villagers. While the narrator and Luo have been educated and exposed to culture (shown by the violin), the headman and the other villagers have spent their whole lives in the village.



The success of Luo's trick comes from the fact that the headman doesn't know who or what Mozart is, despite the fact that the headman is charged with the re-education of Luo and the narrator. The villagers' reaction to hearing Mozart is the novel's first suggestion that art (including music and literature) is universally appealing.



Chinese society and culture are stifled at this point in history. Communism venerates the poor peasant as the ideal, and education stands in direct opposition to this ideal. Notice that the narrator states that he's learned nothing, even when he's spent several years presumably learning about industry and agriculture. This continues to develop the sense of the cultural divide between the narrator and the villagers, and shows how little the narrator thinks of Mao's goals.



Mao's power came in part from his cult of personality, which raised him up to the level of a national hero. Because of this, an admission that Mao experiences dental issues like everyone else is damaging. Noting that both the country's "hero" and its worst enemy both have dental problems (and see the same dentist) does even more to break down Mao's persona.



The narrator says that he and Luo grew up in apartments next to each other and were best friends. Luo only hit the narrator once, in 1968. A political rally was happening, and the dentist was going to be publically humiliated. Luo and the narrator ventured to the rally, where they saw the dentist on his hands and knees, wearing a heavy cement sign around his neck bearing his name and the word "reactionary." A man, speaking angrily over a loudspeaker, interrogated the dentist about sleeping with a nurse. The narrator began to cry, and Luo punched him.

Much of the Cultural Revolution consisted of public humiliations like what the dentist experienced. While the narrator only experiences an emotional reaction and feels helpless to do anything, Luo feels emotion and takes (misguided and violent) action. This shows that even as young teenagers, Luo is already more developed and mature, and therefore more willing to take action.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2

The narrator explains that there wasn't much to differentiate himself and Luo from the other teenagers sent to the mountain Phoenix of the Sky, which was named for its insane height. The mountain could only be climbed on foot, and the only westerner to travel to the region was a French missionary in the 1940s. The missionary was advised against climbing the mountain itself, as it was inhabited by armed and dangerous opium growers.

Luo and the narrator's new home for re-education is extremely far removed from anything they've ever known. The remoteness only adds to the sense of limbo they experience. The fact that the mountain can only be climbed on foot also begins to create the sense that life there is hard work.



The mountain was home to 20 villages, each of which took in five or six intellectuals from the city. The village where Luo and the narrator are sent, however, is so poor that it can only take in the two of them. They are assigned to the house on stilts, a mostly unfurnished public building. The house soon becomes famous in the village because of Luo's **alarm clock**, which features a rooster that crows when the alarm goes off. It is the first clock the village has ever seen, and it entrances the village. Every morning, the headman comes to the house on stilts to watch the clock, and at 9am he whistles and yells for the villagers to get to work.

The clock is representative of the more cosmopolitan way of life of the city, and it is therefore in direct opposition to the idea of the noble peasant. The headman's fascination with the clock, however, indicates that despite the goals of the Cultural Revolution, the city maintains an air of mystery and intrigue that can ensnare even the most rural peasants.



The narrator explains that the work that he and Luo do consists primarily of hauling human and animal feces to the fields in "back buckets." One morning, Luo sneakily turned the **clock** back an hour. He and the narrator delighted in this, as it helped temper their resentment towards the opium growers turned "poor peasants" by the Communist regime.

The narrator begins to suggest that the peasants aren't necessarily thrilled with the events of the Cultural Revolution either. His phrasing makes it seem as though becoming a poor peasant was a demotion, not a promotion, which complicates the peasants' role in the narrator's re-education.



The mountain is exceptionally rainy, and Luo and the narrator find this extremely depressing. Luo, in particular, begins to suffer from insomnia. One night, Luo asks the narrator to play something on the violin. As he plays, the narrator gloomily thinks of how poor his chances are of getting to go home: three in a thousand, on account of his parents being enemies of the state. As he plays a Tibetan song that has been rewritten to glorify Chairman Mao, the narrator thinks that Luo's chances of getting to go home are even worse.

This Tibetan song has been rewritten in a similar way that Luo renamed the Mozart sonata to make it about Mao. This develops the idea that censorship in Mao's China has a distinct goal: to flatter him, extol his virtues, and further develop him as the hero of the country. Once his name has been added to music, the music is acceptable. This suggests the vapidness of censorship.



The narrator says that because he plays the violin, he might someday be able to perform communist music in the nearby city Yong Jing. Luo is only skilled at storytelling, which the narrator says is charming but underappreciated by everyone but the village headman. The narrator explains that due to the remoteness of the mountain, nobody in the village had ever seen a film, but the headman delighted in hearing Luo recount stories from films he'd seen. The headman decides to send Luo and the narrator to see a film in Yong Jing, which they must then relate back to the villagers, taking as much time in their retelling as the film itself runs.

The headman sits and times the "oral cinema show" with Luo's **clock**. Luo brilliantly recounts the film, asking the villagers questions to keep them interested. His performance is such a success that the headman promises to send them to see another film and compensate them for the four-day round trip journey as though they'd been working in the fields.

Notice that the narrator doesn't see any end to re-education, or indeed, to Mao's rule of China—this is evidence of the narrator's youth and inexperience. Despite Luo being a city boy, his one talent is interestingly one that is highly valued by this rural society. The way that the headman chooses to use Luo's talent shows that the headman is interested in more cosmopolitan things like movies.



Luo manages to marry the urban with the rural with the success of the "oral cinema show," and he's handsomely rewarded for it. This shows how much the headman values storytelling, and it suggests once again that he might not be as opposed to urban ideas as Mao might like him to be.



PART 1, CHAPTER 3

The narrator says that the "princess of Phoenix mountain," the Little Seamstress, wears canvas shoes, has a long ponytail tied with a red ribbon, and has lovely sparkling eyes. Her father is the only tailor on the mountain. He travels from village to village with his old sewing machine and is treated like a king wherever he goes, while the Little Seamstress stays at home with a newer sewing machine.

Luo and the narrator run into the tailor's procession one day as they scramble along a mountain path. The tailor rides in a chair on a bearer's back, while another man carries the sewing machine. As the boys pass the caravan, the tailor yells "wy-o-lin!" loudly at them and laughs. He explains that when he was a boy, his master had a violin on his wall to impress clients. As the procession moves on, the tailor shouts "wy-o-lin" several more times.

Several weeks later, the narrator and Luo travel to the tailor's village to visit the Little Seamstress and ask her to lengthen Luo's pants. Luo tells her about running into her father, and the Little Seamstress laughs and explains that the tailor is an overgrown child. She explains that her mother died young, and since then, her father has done whatever he wants.

Sewing and clothing construction are treated with a similar reverence to storytelling, as shown by the tailor's kingly status. By referring to the Little Seamstress as the princess of the mountain, the narrator introduces the fact that he and Luo won't be her only suitors.



The tailor is teasing the narrator for his instrument, though at the same time, he suggests that musical instruments like violins are impressive and a status symbol. This continues to develop the differences between those undergoing re-education and the native mountain dwellers.



The way the Little Seamstress speaks about the tailor makes it seem as though she thinks of herself as being more mature than he is. This foreshadows the Little Seamstress's coming of age later; just like her father willfully embraces youth, she sneakily and selfishly embraces adulthood.



The narrator explains that the Little Seamstress's beauty made him and Luo want to stay and watch her work. Noticing a catalog on the table, the narrator asks the Little Seamstress if she can read. She admits she can't read much, but says she loves talking to people who can. She gets up and begins heating water on the stove. Luo confirms that she's going to offer them boiling water and not tea, which is a local custom that means she likes her guests.

Luo tells the Little Seamstress that the two of them have something in common, and he asks if she'd like to bet on it. She offers to lengthen Luo's pants for free if they indeed have something in common. Luo asks her to take off her shoe and sock. He puts his foot next to hers and remarks that they both have second toes longer than all the other toes. On the way back home, the narrator asks Luo if he's fallen in love with the Little Seamstress. He replies that she's not civilized enough.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

The narrator describes what it's like to work in "the little coal mine." He and Luo work together, naked and covered in coal dust, to haul baskets of coal from deep in the tunnel to a pile outside. He explains that, though copper mining has declined in the area, coal mining exists still on a small scale. The mines are owned collectively by everyone on the mountain, and all the youths undergoing re-education must work two-month stints in the mine. The narrator says that he and Luo didn't know that the mines would have such an effect on their lives—he says that hearing "the little coal mine" today, as an adult, gives him shivers.

Luo and the narrator work in constant fear that they won't make it out of the mine alive. There are no safety measures in the mines, and the peasants who work there love to tell tales of fatal mine accidents. The narrator describes his visions of dying in the mine while he works, and at one point, he hears someone sobbing in the tunnel and knows it's Luo.

When Luo and the narrator have been working in the mine for six weeks, Luo contracts malaria. He feels cold and begins to hallucinate. The other miners laugh and discuss what to do. One man fetches willow and peach branches, strips Luo's clothing, and begins to whip his bare back to drive out the illness. Luo appears to barely feel the blows. When the man whipping Luo grows tired, he passes the branches to the narrator. Luo instructs the narrator to continue the whipping.

From this early stage, it's obvious that both the narrator and Luo are taken with the Little Seamstress. She too seems taken with both of them, and indicates that despite her rural mountain life, she admires education and the city. This again complicates the project of the Cultural Revolution as the narrator shows that the "peasants" aren't completely sold on being peasants.



Luo isn't just good at storytelling; he's good at relating to people and engaging with their curiosity. However, note how Luo differentiates himself from the Little Seamstress by stating a belief in his own superiority. This sets up Luo's later role as the Little Seamstress's teacher, while the narrator already begins to take an outsider's look at Luo and the Seamstress's relationship.



Though the Cultural Revolution's policies ended in the late 1970s, the narrator's experience in the coal mine shows that the Revolution had lasting effects on the population, even if it didn't fully accomplish its goals. This suggests that the period of re-education was a damaging one, not an enlightening one as the government hoped it would be.



Though the mountain itself is dangerous and represents an escapable situation, the mine crystallizes Luo's and the narrator's fears that they won't leave the mountain alive, or ever: they may never have the opportunity to truly grow up.



Remember that the narrator's parents are both doctors—this traditional remedy surely seems not just ineffective, but also wholly barbaric to the narrator. When the narrator is handed the branches, he's forced to consider what his loyalty to Luo truly means. Luo is lucid enough to go along with the whipping, but the narrator is confronted with the uncomfortably different customs of the mountain.



The narrator attempts to light a cigarette for Luo, but Luo says the cigarette is too heavy and drops it. When the narrator leans to pick it up, he sees a letter addressed to Luo. The narrator opens it and reads the note from the Little Seamstress. She explains that the headman of her village has agreed to host Luo and the narrator so they can recite a film and have a reprieve from the mine. She includes a postscript that says she's been disappointed to come across others who have long second toes.

The Little Seamstress saves Luo from further pain with her letter. The reader gets to see that she can indeed write; she's just not at the educational level of Luo and the narrator. The Seamstress's headman's offer shows that all the villages on the mountain likely value storytelling, and further that they're interested in stories from films and urban sources.



PART 1, CHAPTER 5

The narrator and Luo have seen three films in Yong Jing, and for the Little Seamstress's village, they decide to tell *The Little Flower Seller*. It's a drama from North Korea, and Luo made even the headman cry when he told the story in his own village. Though Luo declared he was well enough to travel to the Little Seamstress's village, he suffers another bout of malaria on the way and is alternately hot and cold.

The Little Flower Seller is more commonly known as The Flower Girl. It's an extremely emotional film that shows the benefits of class struggle, and it was screened extensively in China during the early 70s. Showing the film, particularly in the cities, would paint the project of the Revolution in a positive light.



When they reach the Little Seamstress's house, Luo is dizzy with fever. The Little Seamstress cancels Luo and the narrator's performance and tucks Luo into her own bed, which boasts a mosquito net. She calls the narrator to come with her to pick "broken-bowl-shards," a plant with medicinal properties. Back at the house, she pounds it into a paste and applies it to Luo's wrist under a bandage.

When it comes to practical matters like treating malaria, the Little Seamstress shows that she has far more knowledge and education than Luo does. She also shows Luo loyalty here by canceling his performance and caring for him. Unlike the cold and greedy headman, she treats Luo and the narrator with kindness.



Luo falls asleep in the evening. The Little Seamstress asks the narrator if he believes in "things you can't explain naturally." He replies that he doesn't always believe in them, but sometimes you can't deny them. The Little Seamstress asks if Luo's father is a Buddhist, and the narrator says he only knows that Luo's father is a dentist. He explains what a dentist is, swears the Little Seamstress to secrecy, and tells her that Luo's father worked on Chairman Mao's teeth. The Little Seamstress is quiet for a moment and then asks if the dentist would mind if sorceresses kept a vigil around Luo.

The Little Seamstress's knowledge of medicinal plants and remedies is contrasted here with her ignorance of dentistry, which in this situation becomes a marker of Luo and the narrator's urban roots. This shows again just how rural and uneducated the Little Seamstress is in comparison to the boys. Calling the sorceresses is an act of loyalty by the Little Seamstress; she truly believes in their ability to drive out evil spirits.



Around midnight, four ancient and ugly crones arrive. One holds a bow and arrow that she claims never fails to kill demons. After a while, the sorceresses start to yawn and fall asleep. The Little Seamstress asks the narrator to tell the witches a story to keep them awake. He begins to tell the story of the flower seller, but he struggles to captivate his audience. Suddenly, midway through the narrator's recitation, Luo deliriously interjects, out of sequence, with the final line of the film. The sorceresses are moved to tears.

Luo's interjection here is a testament to his storytelling abilities—even when he's not actually telling the story, and even when he throws in lines out of order, he can still elicit emotions from an audience. This stands in contrast to the narrator's self-described poor performance, which sets the narrator up to grow and develop in this area as the novel progresses.



The oil lamps flicker and die, but the narrator sees the Little Seamstress kiss Luo before they go out completely. The narrator finishes the story of the flower seller and the sorceresses weep through the entire second half.

Luo's storytelling abilities seem especially powerful here, as his mistimed interjection keeps the sorceresses crying for about an hour (the film runs just over two hours) even with the narrator's sub-par storytelling.



PART 2, CHAPTER 1

The narrator tells the reader that Four-Eyes, a friend from the city, has a suitcase that he keeps hidden. He says that Four-Eyes' odds of getting off the mountain are also three in a thousand, as his parents were writers. On the mountain, the narrator, Luo, and Four-Eyes often cook and drink together, and the narrator says their close friendship during their re-education made the fact that Four-Eyes never mentioned the suitcase surprising. Four-Eyes lives in perpetual fear of the peasants and takes every precaution to act like he's not part of the bourgeois class.

It's reasonable to assume that like Luo and the narrator, Four-Eyes isn't a true convert to the goals of the Revolution. He does, however, show that he's willing to take on whatever role it takes to appease the peasants (and the government) so he doesn't suffer because of his intellectual status. This shows that even though he's "friends" with the narrator and Luo, he's not a particularly loyal friend.



The morning after the sorceress's vigil at his bedside, Luo feels well enough to go home. He and the narrator pass the village where Four-Eyes is staying, and they see him tilling a flooded paddy field with a water buffalo. The water buffalo has an extremely long and twitching tail, which hits Four-Eyes in the face and knocks his glasses into the mud. The narrator runs into the field to help look for the glasses and he manages to rescue them from the buffalo's attempts to trample them. When Four-Eyes can see again, he notices how sick Luo looks and suggests that Luo and the narrator go to his house to rest.

The narrator's descriptions of the travel time between the villages gives the sense again that just the simple act of existing on the mountain is hard work. Four-Eyes' struggle with the buffalo marks him as a city boy—despite his attempts to impress the peasants of his village, this isn't his finest moment. The narrator shows that he's loyal to Four-Eyes, regardless of how duplicitous Four-Eyes might turn out to be.



The narrator explains that Four-Eyes leaves his house unlocked to demonstrate to the peasants that he trusts them. The narrator and Luo sit on the porch. When the air begins to get cold, the narrator finds a sweater for Luo and goes to look for another one. The narrator digs through a packing crate full of clothes and finds a small suitcase that's extremely heavy, given its size.

Four-Eyes is trying very hard to act as though his re-education is succeeding in front of the peasants, but the suitcase shatters this illusion. He's also trying to look like a good friend to Luo and the narrator, but the discovery that he's hiding something builds tension as to what it is and why he's hiding it.



When Four-Eyes returns that evening, he evades the narrator's questions about the suitcase. Luo finally says that he thinks the suitcase contains forbidden books. Four-Eyes looks panicked for a moment before he deems Luo delirious with fever. The narrator says that not long after this, Four-Eyes bought a lock and started locking his door.

Though the three boys continue to see each other as friends, Four-Eyes clearly fears that the narrator or Luo will report his suitcase. He doesn't trust his friends to remain loyal to him, which casts a sense of uncertainty on their friendship.



Several weeks later, Luo's malaria improves. He unwraps the bandage on his wrist to reveal a large blister that heals when his fevers stop. Luo and the narrator celebrate at Four-Eyes' house and spend the night. The narrator checks under the bed for the suitcase, but it's not there anymore.

Luo and the narrator often discuss which books might be in the suitcase. The narrator says the book titles are like Tibetan incense in that they only need to speak the titles to conjure the beauty of the books. One day, Luo asks the narrator what he knows about western literature. The narrator knows very little. Luo says that one of his aunts read to him from [Don Quixote](#) when he was a child, but her books were burned at the start of the revolution. The narrator explains to the reader that by the time he and Luo learned to read, there was nothing left to read. Further, the "western literature" sections of bookstores contained only the complete works of Enver Hoxha, an Albanian Communist leader.

The narrator and Luo decide that since Four-Eyes' parents are writers, they probably want Four-Eyes to be a writer too and therefore they want him to have access to books. They wonder how Four-Eyes' parents managed to hide the books and then get them up the mountain.

In early spring, the mountain gets several inches of snow and the village headman gives everyone the day off. Luo and the narrator head off to see Four-Eyes, whose glasses have finally broken. The narrator explains that Four-Eyes certainly isn't going to let being close to blind stop him from working, as any defect could convince the peasants in charge of his future that he's not properly re-educated.

In Four-Eyes' village, the headman hasn't given anyone the day off. The village is busy ferrying rice to the district storage station. When Luo and the narrator find Four-Eyes, he's filling his hod (a type of basket) with rice, a dazed look on his face. He tells Luo and the narrator that his mother is going to send him a new pair, but Luo quickly suggests that Four-Eyes allow him and the narrator to help carry the rice in exchange for one of the books.

The final recovery is proof that, though the Little Seamstress isn't educated in a book-learning sense, she does possess skills and knowledge (though Luo will go on to ignore these facts). Four-Eyes becomes more and more distrustful and secretive.



Luo and the narrator's thought exercise shows several things. First, it shows how repressed Chinese society is. The fact that the boys can come up with all these titles, however, shows that the censorship and repression haven't fully achieved their goals, as these works are still known. Further, the boys want to read these books; the desire is still there. This puts the goals of the Revolution at odds with the goals of those it hopes to revolutionize.



Four-Eyes' parents evidently don't support the Revolution if they're hiding books and then providing them to their son. Four-Eyes' unwillingness to share with his friends is, ironically, an individualistic move and therefore directly opposed to Communist ideals.



The narrator suggests that Four-Eyes' situation is particularly tenuous because of his vision problems. Four-Eyes must act as though he's loyal to the village and the purpose of the Revolution, as he's at even more of a disadvantage than Luo and the narrator are.



Luo operates on the hope that Four-Eyes will take him at his word and behave loyally. The fact that Luo is more than willing to work on a day off in exchange for a book is indicative of the power and the draw of literature when it's forbidden. Notice, too, that the narrator doesn't speak; as the sidekick, he lets Luo handle the negotiations.



Four-Eyes insists that he doesn't have books, picks up the hod, and starts up the slippery path. Luo and the narrator watch as he totters, falls, and spills the rice. They walk to Four-Eyes and gather the rice off the ground. Luo, the narrator, and Four-Eyes take turns carrying the rice to the district storage station, and when they return to Four-Eyes' house, he gives them a thin book by a writer named Balzac.

Here, a very Communist way of doing things (working together for a common goal) results in a decidedly anti-Communist end (western literature). Finally Four-Eyes acknowledges he indeed has these forbidden books, and he takes a leap of faith trusting his friends to not rat him out.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

The narrator tells the reader that when Balzac's name is translated to Chinese, it's composed of four syllables and the name sounds exotically beautiful. The book is titled *Ursule Mirouët*, and Luo begins reading it that night. He finishes it at daybreak and passes it to the narrator, who sits in bed all day and finishes the book at dusk. The narrator explains that until this point, he'd heard nothing but "revolutionary blather" about Communism—this was his first experience reading about passion, love, and impulsive action. Further, even though the narrator knows nothing about France, he finds that the book is so relatable that it could've been written about his neighbors.

The narrator never suggests that there was any coin toss or "fair" way of deciding who got to read the book first. Luo gets it, which shows that his needs and desires come before those of the narrator and reinforces the narrator's sidekick status. The discussion of Balzac's name in translation hearkens back to the narrator's comment about Tibetan incense and the beauty of language in general. The idea that the novel is so highly relatable even to the narrator continues to develop the idea that art and literature are universal.



When the narrator finishes the novel, Luo, who had left that morning, still hasn't returned. The narrator says that Luo has certainly gone to see the Little Seamstress and relate Balzac's tale to her. Thinking of this, the narrator suddenly feels jealous for the first time. He tries to play his violin, but it sounds shrill.

Luo's relationship with the Little Seamstress is already causing him to act independently from the narrator, which indicates his growing maturity. The narrator, on the other hand, isn't enjoying his forced independence—he's not ready to make that leap yet.



The narrator decides to copy his favorite passages from *Ursule Mirouët*. He looks for paper but decides to write it on the inside of his sheepskin coat. Painstakingly, he covers the entire inside of his coat with tiny script and dozes off late at night.

By writing on his coat, the narrator turns his coat into an almost sacred object. Though the particulars are different, this follows the same line of reasoning that gives the tailor his high status on the mountain. Clothing is important, particularly when paired with literature.



At 3am, Luo wakes the narrator. Luo says he has something to show and pulls out a white handkerchief. He unfolds it slowly and the narrator realizes it's actually fabric torn from the Little Seamstress's shirt. Inside are beautiful leaves stained with blood. Luo explains that they're ginkgo leaves from a clearing near the Little Seamstress's village. He and the Little Seamstress had sex under the tree, and the blood on the leaves is hers. The narrator can barely think. Luo says the Little Seamstress laughed after they had sex.

Having sex certainly had nothing to do with the narrator in Luo's mind. However, for the narrator, it's an earthshattering discovery that makes it so he can't ignore Luo's growing maturity and independence. By sharing the leaves and story with the narrator, Luo reinforces the narrator's position as a sidekick and bystander to his romance.



PART 2, CHAPTER 3

Luo and the narrator return *Ursule Mirouët* to Four-Eyes with the hope that he'll lend them more books, but he refuses, especially once his new glasses arrive. The narrator and Luo regret ever returning the novel, and Luo laments that he never got the opportunity to read it out loud to the Little Seamstress. He maintains that doing so would've made her cultured and refined.

The narrator says that one day Luo borrowed the narrator's sheepskin coat with the passage written on the inside and read it to the Little Seamstress. She reread the passage herself, sat still for a while, and finally put the coat on. Luo told the narrator that Balzac touched the Little Seamstress like he was a wizard.

One Sunday in early summer, Luo and the narrator go to visit Four-Eyes and find him heating a cauldron of water in the yard. When the water boils, he strips his clothes and puts them in the boiling water. The narrator notices that Four-Eyes' skin is covered in angry, bleeding bumps. Four-Eyes shows his friends his underwear, dotted with lice eggs, and explains that he picked up the lice at the Thousand-Meter Cliff.

The narrator says that a friend of Four-Eyes' mother had promised to find a position for Four-Eyes at a revolutionary journal. However, to make it look like the friend isn't favoring Four-Eyes, he suggested that Four-Eyes collect from the peasants "sincere, authentic folk songs full of romantic realism" to publish in the journal. Four-Eyes spent a week looking for these songs without success when he finally heard about the old miller who lives on the Thousand-Meter Cliff. The miller knows all the songs of the region.

Four-Eyes tells the narrator and Luo that the old man is a drunk and he eats pebbles dipped in saltwater. Four-Eyes declined to join the miller in enjoying this dish, which offended the miller. He refused to sing any of his songs, and Four-Eyes stayed for several days. Luo asks if Four-Eyes would lend him another book by Balzac if he and the narrator are able to get the miller to sing folk songs.

The narrator and Luo acted loyally by returning the book, while Four-Eyes demonstrates his intense selfishness. Luo evidently puts a lot of stock in the transformative power of literature, though in doing so he reveals how superior his own education makes him feel in comparison to the Little Seamstress.



Luo's superiority complex aside, the Little Seamstress's reaction does show that literature is transformative. Even a passage is enough to cause this awe in the Little Seamstress, and not coincidentally, this reaction likely reinforces Luo's sense of superiority.



The boys' reactions suggest that lice like this is something they haven't encountered before; it's unique to the mountain (or rural life in general). This shows again that life on the mountain is full of these difficulties, and dealing with these events is all part of the boys' re-education.



Pay special attention to the way the man at the journal describes the folk songs. He seems to believe that the folk songs will be fully supportive of the goals of the Revolution by championing the ideal of the romantic, noble peasant. The fact that Four-Eyes struggled to find songs in the first place suggests that the man's idea might be misguided and that the Revolution might not have its roots in the actual thoughts and values of peasants.



Four-Eyes' selfishness means that his people skills are sorely lacking; he obviously struggles to connect with people because he's only looking out for himself. Again, Luo is the one arranging this trade-off; the narrator remains a sidekick to this whole thing.



PART 2, CHAPTER 4

The narrator wears a copy of Chairman Mao's jacket, made by the Little Seamstress, and a green army cap. Luo borrows an army uniform and poses as a translator and they head for the Thousand-Meter Cliff. When they arrive at the mill, the narrator greets the miller in Mandarin rather than the provincial dialect. The man doesn't speak Mandarin, and Luo explains it's the official language of Beijing. The miller doesn't know where Beijing is, startling the boys with his ignorance. Luo explains that Beijing is the new name for Bai Ping, and at that, the old man looks at the narrator with respect.

Luo tells the miller that the narrator has traveled from Beijing to collect folk songs from the region. The miller looks suspicious and says that the folk songs aren't "proper songs." Luo assures him that the narrator is hoping to collect "authentic, robustly primitive" songs. The miller tries again to convince Luo that the narrator won't want to hear the songs, but a group of peasants arrive with grain to be milled.

The narrator helps the peasants with their heavy loads and the miller tells the peasants proudly about how revolutionary the narrator is. Luo translates the narrator's Mandarin responses and the peasants shake hands with the narrator.

When the peasants leave, the miller leads Luo and the narrator upstairs. He offers them liquor and motions for them to sit on the bed. The narrator's skin crawls thinking about the lice, and Luo suggests they sit outside. The miller refuses and the three sit on the bed and drink. The narrator can feel the lice as the miller fetches a platter of rocks with a bowl of saltwater and three sets of chopsticks. Hesitantly, the narrator and Luo join the miller in dipping the rocks in the saltwater, sucking on them, and spitting them across the room.

The miller stops the grindstone and closes the windows to improve the acoustics of the mill. He fetches an instrument with three strings and begins to sing. The narrator and Luo are captivated by the miller's contorting and rolling stomach as he sings a song about lice and nuns. The song is crude and funny, and the narrator and Luo laugh. Luo fills their glasses and raises a toast to the miller's stomach. The miller allows the boys to touch his stomach as it rolls and undulates. They all drink and, breaking character, the narrator asks in the local dialect what the alcohol is made from. Luo, the narrator, and the miller spit out what they drank: lamp oil, not alcohol.

Though the miller is unaware of the particular changes the Chinese government has been through, his change of attitude towards the disguised narrator shows that he still holds the government and its power in high regard. The miller's lack of knowledge illustrates just how remote and isolated the mountain is. It's a place where people can exist for decades without any idea of what's happening in the cities.



Despite his ignorance, the miller seems very aware of the government's censorship of art and music. His unwillingness adds tension and more evidence for the possibility that his songs aren't at all what Four-Eyes is looking for, and that the Revolution isn't actually rooted in peasant traditions.



Even in disguise and around people he doesn't know, the narrator behaves in a way that reinforces his helpful nature. Note, too, that even though Luo is disguised as the helper, he still takes charge.



The lice are indicative of the miller's lack of civilization—he doesn't even wash his bedding. His dish of choice also shows how different he is from Luo and the narrator. Learning to accept people like the miller for who they are and what they know is one positive aspect of the narrator and Luo's re-education, and it also helps them mature and gain a more diverse worldview.



The novel finally confirms that the songs aren't as revolutionary as Four-Eyes thought they'd be. Interestingly, they have more in common with forbidden western literature, given the songs' sexual nature. This makes them all the more appealing to the narrator and Luo, who want very much to experience these forbidden works. This shows again that such things are universal.



PART 2, CHAPTER 5

At Four-Eyes' house, Four-Eyes happily pores over the folk songs that Luo and the narrator collected. He begins to frown and he finally yells that the songs are just "smutty rhymes," when what he really wanted was "uplifting lyrics with an undertone of romantic realism." Four-Eyes says that the songs Luo and the narrator collected could put the miller in jail because of the songs' erotic nature, and the narrator thinks he hates Four-Eyes.

The narrator muses that Four-Eyes' glimpse of hope for the future has made him exceptionally arrogant. Four-Eyes tells Luo and the narrator to take the pages and burn them. Luo asks for the promised books, but Four-Eyes feigns ignorance. Suddenly, Four-Eyes grabs the transcribed songs and happily yells that he can just alter them to sound revolutionary.

Angry, the narrator lunges at Four-Eyes and accidentally punches him in the jaw. The narrator is blind with rage as they scuffle for the papers. He comes to his senses again outside, and Luo remarks that they won't have anymore Balzac for now.

Four-Eyes confirms that the miller's songs are indeed dangerous (and would be censored or banned by government officials if they found out). Four-Eyes shows how out of touch he is with the peasants he's trying so hard to impress.



Despite his poor opinion of the government and re-education, Four-Eyes shows he's willing to do what it takes to gain favor. He looks out only for himself, and continues to behave extremely selfishly.



This highly emotional reaction shows how unjust the narrator believes censorship is. He sees this as a major betrayal by Four-Eyes of both himself and Luo, as well as a betrayal of the trust that the miller showed them by sharing the songs.



PART 2, CHAPTER 6

The narrator explains that Yong Jing consists of little more than a main street with a hospital, town hall, and a few other public buildings. The narrator says that he believes the village headman sent him and Luo to Yong Jing to watch films because when they were gone, the headman got to be master of the **alarm clock**. In August, the narrator and Luo are sent to see a film with the Little Seamstress. Yong Jing is showing *The Little Flower Seller* again, and the Little Seamstress is transfixed by the film. Luo and the narrator are transfixed watching her watch the film. Halfway through, she whispers in the narrator's ear that she prefers hearing the narrator tell the story of the flower seller to watching it on film.

The Little Seamstress, Luo, and the narrator stay in Yong Jing's cheap hotel that night. The night watchman tells them that there's a woman staying in the hotel who's heading up to Phoenix mountain the following day to collect her re-educated son. Luo, the Little Seamstress, and the narrator stay up half the night wondering who on the mountain gets to go home. They figure it can't be Four-Eyes, with his three in a thousand chances.

The headman evidently doesn't just love storytelling; he loves power, and specifically the power he gains from the alarm clock. He's willing to take power where he can get it, not necessarily just from "good" sources. Watching the film, it remains obvious that both the narrator and Luo are very much in love with the Little Seamstress. The Little Seamstress's comment likely seems to the narrator to be an affirmation of their friendship, which continues to situate him as a sidekick and an observer.



The boys' curiosity suggests that there's some degree of competition and jealousy involved with getting to leave the mountain, which indicates that though the teenagers are supposed to be learning to be a part of a collectivist society, they remain very individualist in this situation.



The next day, the Little Seamstress and Luo visit the cemetery at the bottom of the mountain while the narrator sits by the path to cook sweet potatoes and wait. After a while he looks up and sees the woman from the hotel being carried up the mountain in a chair tied to a man's back. The man decides to rest close to the narrator and puts the woman's chair down. The woman is knitting and pays no notice to the narrator or her bearer.

The narrator addresses the woman in the local dialect. She barely acknowledges the narrator until he switches to a Chengdu accent. She gets out of her chair and sits next to the narrator, still knitting. The two make small talk and the narrator learns that this is Four-Eyes' mother, the poetess. She explains that he's gotten a job at a literary journal thanks to his "splendid peasant songs." The narrator suggests that Four-Eyes was able to successfully collect the songs thanks to his collection of books. The poetess agrees before quickly becoming suspicious and turning to leave.

The poetess asks the narrator his name, and the narrator tells her he's Luo. At this, the poetess seems interested again and asks about Luo's father. When the narrator says that the dentist is currently in jail, the poetess conspiratorially whispers to him that ignorance is fashionable right now and doctors will soon be revered again. She tells "Luo" to not lose hope and shares that while she knits, she's composing poems in her head.

The poetess tells the narrator that Four-Eyes is very fond of Luo and doesn't like the narrator much. The narrator is thrilled he decided to pretend to be Luo and asks the poetess why Four-Eyes doesn't like the narrator. She explains that the narrator is "sly" and thinks Four-Eyes has a secret suitcase, and Four-Eyes once beat the narrator. The narrator is indignant that Four-Eyes spun their fight in this way, but he only tells the poetess that the narrator will be disappointed that the suitcase will be gone. The poetess wishes "Luo" luck and resumes her ascent.

The narrator makes his way to the graveyard to tell Luo and the Little Seamstress about meeting the poetess. They laugh when the narrator tells them he pretended to be Luo. The narrator thinks again that the Little Seamstress is breathtakingly beautiful and thinks he wants to marry her, even if she is Luo's girlfriend. When she finishes laughing, the Little Seamstress suggests stealing Four-Eyes' books.

Notice here that the narrator doesn't even attempt to be anything but an outside observer to Luo and the Little Seamstress's relationship. He voluntarily hangs behind. The knitting woman is an oddity on the mountain; her knitting and the fact that she ignores those around her mark her as being from the city.



Four-Eyes' rewrites were successful, which shows that the government is more interested in hearing what they believe is good and correct than knowing what's actually going on. The poetess suggests that she holds the peasants who live with her son in contempt by refusing to truly acknowledge the narrator until he speaks like a person from the city. This becomes more evidence that she doesn't believe in the Revolution either.



The poetess's view is one that comes with age; it shows the belief that regimes like Mao's come and go and follow a cycle. She also demonstrates the belief that artists and writers will soon be valued again, as she's not given up her craft just because her poems are now illegal.



Four-Eyes isn't above altering anything, story or song, to make it self-serving. This drives home again how selfish he is, as it's even more obvious that he's only looking to improve his own situation by impressing those in power, at the expense of his "friends." This also shows how duplicitous Four-Eyes is, as this is obviously the first the narrator has heard that Four-Eyes doesn't like him.



The Little Seamstress suggests that the narrator and Luo should behave exactly as Four-Eyes did and betray the trust he put in them. Coming from her, this creates the possibility that she herself won't always be loyal and truthful like Luo and the narrator are.



PART 2, CHAPTER 7

Over the next week, the Little Seamstress listens to her customers' gossip and learns that Four-Eyes' village is planning a grand event to mark his departure—they even plan to slaughter a buffalo. The narrator and Luo aren't invited, which they find convenient, since it provides a perfect opportunity to steal the suitcase. Luo and the narrator fashion a master key from a nail, planning to pick Four-Eyes' padlock.

Several days before the theft, the narrator dreams that he's put in charge of stealing the books. In his dream, he approaches Four-Eyes' house and struggles to pick the lock. When it finally gives way, the narrator enters the house to find the poetess calmly knitting inside, smiling. The narrator makes some excuse to the poetess and leaves the house, locking it behind him.

The day before the celebration, the narrator and Luo hear a buffalo bellowing in a ravine: as it's illegal to kill an animal used for farm work, Four-Eyes' headman caused the buffalo to "slip" off the edge of a cliff. A few hours later, Luo and the narrator go to see the buffalo. It's finally dead, and Four-Eyes and his village headman are crouched next to it, collecting the blood in a bamboo vessel. Someone explains to Luo and the narrator that they'll wait for the blood to congeal so they can drink it as a remedy against cowardice. The narrator and Luo watch the headman slice the blood pudding in half. Four-Eyes slurps his half of the blood.

Luo and the narrator watch as villagers add ingredients to the huge stew pot in the center of Four-Eyes' village. Luo points out five old crones coming to join the festivities as guests of honor. The poetess pays the crones, and one of them reads Four-Eyes' palm. It seems to be a grim prediction, as the villagers fall silent and then talk uneasily. The crones begin a dance around the fire and act out exorcising demons. Luo and the narrator leave their vantage point as the dance reaches its climax.

The narrator and Luo walk through the deserted village to Four-Eyes' house. Luo picks the lock, they enter the house, and they shut and lock the door behind them. Luo lights his torch and they're stunned to see that the suitcase is perched right on top of Four-Eyes' assembled luggage. They remove the rope around the suitcase and lift the lid to find a pile of books by French, Russian, and some English authors. The narrator touches the books and feels as though he's touching human lives.

Four-Eyes continues his betrayal of his friends by not inviting them to the event. For the villagers, the event is surely a celebration of their success in re-educating Four-Eyes, which is ironic given that all it seems he's learned on the mountain is how to look out for himself and keep secrets.



The unsuccessful theft in the dream indicates that the narrator has a guilty conscience; stealing and betrayal aren't things that come easily to him. Notice too that he's alone and unsuccessful. This reinforces his role as sidekick.



Even those with power under the Communist system (like Four-Eyes' headman) must lie and omit information or risk punishment. The rule about farm animals' deaths shows that the government values the "peasants" being able to perform their duties as farmers. What the narrator has learned about Four-Eyes makes it seem as though he's probably not fully on board with the blood-drinking ritual; Four-Eyes is probably doing it to earn his headman's favor.



The narrator and Luo watch a picture-perfect example of a collectivist society as the villagers work together to make the stew. The crones harness a more rural version of storytelling when they read Four-Eyes' palm; the power of their form of storytelling is evidenced by the villagers' uneasy reactions.



The literature is already so powerful—even at this point when the narrator and Luo haven't read any of it yet—that the books become almost human. These books are a physical representation of the boys' coming of age, since the books will be what they use to learn about themselves and the world around them.



Luo says the situation reminds him of a film scene in which characters find a suitcase full of money. The narrator asks if Luo is "weeping tears of joy," but Luo says he only feels loathing. The narrator agrees and says that he loathes everyone who wanted to ban the books. He's scared to hear himself say that, as saying such a thing could lead to years in prison.

Luo declares that they need to go. The narrator reminds him that if Four-Eyes says anything, they'll all be at the mercy of the government, but Luo says that the poetess won't allow Four-Eyes to squander his chance to get off the mountain. Luo shuts the suitcase and says that he'll use the books to transform the Little Seamstress.

Luo carries the suitcase and they move into the other room, where they find the window they'd planned to escape through secured with a nail. As they head back into the main room, Luo hears someone outside. The narrator kills the torch, and they hear the sounds of the poetess and Four-Eyes coming back to the house. Four-Eyes is complaining of an upset stomach after drinking the buffalo blood. As the chain on the door rattles, Luo and the narrator dive under the beds. The narrator finds himself next to a full chamber pot.

The poetess finds Four-Eyes medicine for indigestion, and they notice that the rope is no longer around the suitcase. They uneasily discuss whether someone could've broken in, and the poetess tells Four-Eyes that the narrator and Luo are sly. Four-Eyes tells his mother that he stayed friends with them so that Luo's father could someday attend to her teeth.

Four-Eyes puts the buffalo tail in the suitcase and suddenly starts yelling that he has diarrhea. He runs outside to relieve himself in the cornfield, and the poetess runs after him with toilet paper. Once Four-Eyes and the poetess are gone, Luo and the narrator grab the suitcase and run from the house. They stop to rest after an hour and open the suitcase. The buffalo tail appears to be from the buffalo that broke Four-Eyes' glasses.

The narrator and Luo are angry with the government for forbidding art and literature like this, as well as with Four-Eyes for refusing to share. The narrator recognizes the difficulty of this thought, as he's not supposed to feel that way about Mao or those in charge of his re-education.



Luo again asserts his superiority over the Little Seamstress, even though he himself hasn't read any of these novels either. Notice that he sees that the books will be transformative for the Little Seamstress; he doesn't acknowledge that they might be transformative for him, as well.



The indigestion Four-Eyes experiences makes the traditional peasant life seem far less idyllic and romantic. This mirrors his thoughts about the peasant songs: he believes at first that these things will be revolutionary and fulfilling, but upon actually experiencing them, he finds that they're either unpleasant or in direct opposition to his goals.



Four-Eyes confirms that his friendship with Luo and the narrator was only one of convenience; he only gave them what loyalty he did so that he could use their relationship for his own gain later. Essentially, he preyed on Luo and the narrator's loyalty, as they've demonstrated throughout the novel that they believe in returning favors.



The buffalo tail is a trophy for Four-Eyes. This suggests that his time on the mountain was little more than an unpleasant interlude in his life, and it also shows how he views the culture of the mountain people. Four-Eyes' re-education was obviously unsuccessful, as he still seems to view the villagers as "others" to be fetishized, rather than thinking of them as his comrades.



PART 3, CHAPTER 1

Four-Eyes leaves the mountain and says nothing about his stolen books, and the village headman leaves for a month-long Communist Party conference. The narrator and Luo spend the month reading, and the village falls into "quiet anarchy." As the villagers were unhappy to switch from cultivating opium to being peasant farmers in the first place, they don't care that the boys stop going to work.

Luo devours every novel by Balzac, while the narrator is very taken with Romain Rolland's novel *Jean-Christophe*. The novel shows the narrator the value of individual action and standing up to the whole world. The narrator is so passionate about the ideas he encounters in *Jean-Christophe* that, for the first time ever, he wants to own something that's his own, not shared with Luo. The narrator writes a note in the book as though Luo were gifting it to him for his birthday, and Luo signs it. The narrator then writes in three of Balzac's novels, dedicating them to Luo.

Several weeks later, the mountain experiences a terrible storm. The morning after the storm, Luo loads a hod with vegetables and a Balzac novel and sets off to read to the Little Seamstress. Upon his return that night, he tells the narrator that the storm caused a landslide, and part of the path is now very narrow and dangerous. The narrator explains that Luo is terrified of heights and he relates a childhood experience in which Luo was too scared to climb a water tower.

The next day, the narrator decides to go with Luo to see the Little Seamstress. When the boys reach the dangerous part of the path, even the narrator is nervous about it: the narrow ridge has drops of unknown depths on either side. The narrator notices a raven with a red beak sitting at the end of the narrow part, and he offers to take Luo's hod. As he lifts the hod, the wind blows and the narrator begins to feel dizzy. He starts to walk the ridge like a tightrope walker, but he stops halfway when the dizziness gets worse. The narrator wonders what Jean-Christophe would think of turning back and decides that he wouldn't mind, since the narrator hasn't yet had the opportunity to have sex, fall in love, or take individual action against the world.

The "quiet anarchy" suggests that the headman is the only person in the village who truly believes in the Revolution, and even that is thrown into question given the headman's love of power. The villagers seem as though they're undergoing their own form of re-education, as they're forced to change from opium farmers to peasants.



The idea of individual action and taking on the world alone is an idea that, importantly, goes directly against the Communist project of creating a collectivist society. The narrator, then, is learning the exact opposite of what he's supposed to be learning during his re-education. This also becomes an indicator that the narrator is growing up, as he finally begins to ask for his independence from Luo.



The fact that Luo is willing to face his fears to see the Little Seamstress shows how much he cares, both about her and his project of civilizing her. The narrator also suggests that when it comes to heights, he's actually capable of taking charge of his own desires and achieving those desires independently of Luo.



Jean-Christophe has evidently had the effect of providing the narrator with an individual worldview. This again shows that the narrator is maturing and developing, as the worldview isn't just one that champions individualism; it's also something the narrator found on his own. The narrator's discomfort with the ridge indicates that the ridge is probably more dangerous than originally thought, which creates the sense that Luo is risking a lot to visit the Little Seamstress. He, too, is maturing and developing.



The narrator turns around and crawls to Luo, then points to the red-beaked raven and asks if it's there every day when Luo crosses this ridge. Luo says it's always there in the morning, but not in the evening. The narrator tells Luo to go on alone and watches him hesitantly cross the ridge. He feels unsure of how Luo's "adventure" reading Balzac to the Little Seamstress will turn out.

The next night, the narrator wakes from a nightmare in which he watched Luo and a nondescript girl walk along a ridge that dropped off sharply on either side. The girl turned into the Little Seamstress and pranced along the path, while Luo struggled to follow her. The narrator looked away to see if a red-beaked raven was there, but when he looked back he saw that the Little Seamstress was gone. The narrator and Luo slid down the nearly vertical mountainside to find the Little Seamstress's body, broken and bleeding. Luo took her in his arms and also started bleeding. When the narrator tells Luo about the nightmare, Luo isn't worried and he refuses to tell the Little Seamstress not to take the narrow path to come visit them. Luo does agree to not share the narrator's dream with her.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

The village headman returns from the Party meeting angry and in a great deal of pain because he's had dental work done in Yong Jing and the dentist pulled a good tooth and left a bad tooth. The narrator and Luo return to work so they don't incur the headman's wrath. One night, the headman appears at their door with swollen cheeks, shows them a small lump of tin, and asks Luo if he'd fix his painful tooth. Luo tells the headman that it would take a modern drill to do it right.

Several days later, the tailor arrives in the village. Though everyone offers to house the tailor, he insists on staying with Luo and the narrator. The boys are perplexed, but they figure the tailor believes that Luo will become his son-in-law and wants to get to know him.

The narrator and Luo's house is transformed into a tailor's workshop, and the boys get to see up close how much the village women and girls care about clothes. The narrator remarks that poverty and political regimes will never stop women from wanting to be well dressed. As night falls, men come to join the crowd of women at the house, and the gathering becomes boisterous. Finally, the tailor orders everyone out of the house.

Watching Luo tackle the dangerous ridge leads the narrator to wonder what other changes Luo's project of civilizing the Little Seamstress might bring. The narrator isn't ready yet to tackle his fears like Luo is, hence deciding to stay behind.



Luo doesn't show a ton of regard for his friends' dreams and fears; though he agrees not to share the narrator's dream with the Little Seamstress, that seems to be mostly because he doesn't think that the dream means anything. The dream, however, does foreshadow the Little Seamstress's eventual departure from the mountain. In particular, the narrator seems subconsciously aware that both he and Luo are at the mercy of the Little Seamstress's whims and desires, even though Luo remains confident in his own superiority.



The headman's fate recalls the poetess's belief that soon doctors will be revered again, as the headman's pain seems a direct result of removing good doctors from their posts. Despite his dislike of the headman, Luo's refusal to fill his tooth is a kind decision, and one that would save the headman from excruciating pain.



Luo and the narrator seem perfectly content with their assessment of the tailor's motives, which indicates that Luo believes that the Little Seamstress is indeed his future wife. He's beginning to gain control over his future.



Here, the narrator ascribes the same kind of universality to women's dress as he does to literature. Further, the Cultural Revolution can't touch and alter this desire, just as it can't truly eliminate citizens' desire for forbidden literature.



Luo, the tailor, and the narrator eat dinner and the narrator offers to play his violin before they go to bed. The tailor asks for a story instead, saying that the Little Seamstress has been telling him about Luo and the narrator's wonderful stories. Luo insists that the narrator tell the story, which the narrator thinks is because Luo doesn't want the tailor, as his future father-in-law, to think he's too forward.

The narrator asks the tailor and Luo to wash their feet and get in bed before beginning. Rather than tell the story of a North Korean or Chinese film, the narrator decides to tell [The Count of Monte Cristo](#). He deliberates over the first line, which provides the date and setting (1815, Marseilles). When the tailor asks why the story takes place so far away, the narrator suggests that if the tailor doesn't find the story interesting, they can all rest instead. A few minutes later, the tailor asks the main character's name, and the narrator begins the story.

The narrator talks for hours and begins to enjoy the process of storytelling. When the narrator gets tired and has to stop, Luo whispers that the narrator should've been a writer. The narrator falls asleep but is quickly woken by the tailor asking why he stopped. The narrator resumes the tale, but pauses every half hour or so to keep the tailor engaged. The tailor finally allows the narrator to stop close to dawn, and the tailor pays the headman so that he, the narrator, and Luo can get some sleep.

It takes the narrator nine nights to tell the entire story. The story begins to influence the clothes the tailor makes during the day, and the narrator explains that the five-pointed anchor motif was exceptionally popular on Phoenix mountain for years after this.

On the third night, the village headman interrupts the narrator's storytelling. Though the tailor offers pleasantries to the headman, the headman ignores them and instructs the narrator to come with him to the Public Security Office. The narrator is terrified, especially when the headman accuses him of spreading "reactionary trash." Luo tries to explain that [The Count of Monte Cristo](#) isn't Chinese and is actually about a poor sailor and therefore a "revolutionary worker," but the headman won't hear of it. The narrator gets out of bed and dresses as though he'll be gone for a long time.

Though the narrator is put in control of the evening's entertainment, it's Luo who puts him in power, so the narrator still isn't exactly seizing control of his own life. The narrator believes that Luo is trying to shape his own future by not telling the story himself.



The tailor's interest in the French tale again illustrates that literature can be enjoyed by anyone, and stories are universal. Notice how painstakingly the narrator chooses his words to begin the story. Though he didn't necessarily want this power in the first place, his power over the trajectory and style of the story allows him to come into himself and find a sense of maturity and purpose.



Luo has a point, and it ties together the novel as a whole, since the narrator is the one telling the reader the story: he did become a writer. Because of that, the narrator's recitation at this point in his life becomes the point at which the narrator began to truly come into his mature, adult self through storytelling.



The popularity of the anchor is particularly satisfying, as it reinforces the universality of literature and motifs. The villagers likely aren't even aware of its origins, which only reinforces its universality.



Luo has had enough education and re-education to be able to pinpoint and articulate the universal threads of a western story. The narrator's fear is a fear that he won't be able to actually complete his coming of age process, specifically because he received education from banned sources. The power of the government is evident here; the narrator doesn't believe he'll return.



Luo offers to go with the narrator and the headman, but the narrator refuses. The narrator trembles as he approaches the headman, but the headman doesn't move. Finally, the headman looks at Luo and says that he still has the piece of tin. Luo is confused, but the headman says that if Luo can fix his bad tooth, he'll leave the narrator alone.

The headman's offer shows that he cares more about himself than he does about his role in stifling anti-Communist materials. This continues to break down the ideal that the peasants are all for Communism.



PART 3, CHAPTER 3

The narrator describes the headman's terrible dental situation. The bad tooth is all the way at the back of the headman's mouth. Luo inserts a makeshift drill made from the tailor's sewing machine into the headman's mouth as the tailor works the treadle of the machine and begins to drill into the tooth. The headman screams in pain and accuses Luo of nearly killing him. Luo explains that a real drill spins much faster, and the slower the drill spins the more painful it will be. The headman instructs Luo to try again, but the pain is again too much for the headman to hold still.

This horrific situation illustrates one of the worst-case scenarios of repressing knowledge and education. Further, it shows that the repression harms the peasants, the very people that the government claims to revere. The fact that Luo agreed to fill the headman's tooth is a demonstration of loyalty to the narrator.



Luo asks the headman to rinse his mouth and then suggests that in order for the dental work to progress, the headman will need to allow them to strap him down to the bed. The narrator is dumbfounded, but the headman agrees. The tailor is tasked with keeping the headman's head still, while the narrator takes over working the treadle of the sewing machine. Luo attacks the tooth with the needle. The narrator feels suddenly sadistic and slows down the treadle. Luo appears complicit as the needle slows down to one or two rotations per second and chisels into the tooth.

The headman's cooperation suggests that some things are more important than the enforcement of Communism—the universal experience of pain, for example. When the narrator is allowed such a degree of power, he runs with it. This is a turning point for the narrator's coming of age, as torturing the headman like this is an experience in which the narrator takes individual action against the world.



PART 3, CHAPTER 4

The miller says that he saw "the two of them" naked by the waterfall in the valley. He also saw the red-beaked ravens, which seemed disturbed. The miller went to see what disturbed the birds and came upon the "interpreter" (Luo) and the Little Seamstress having sex in the deep part of the natural pool. He says he felt ashamed. He'd never seen anyone have sex while swimming, and he was very aware that because he's old, he'll never experience sex like that.

By bringing in another person's first-person perspective, the narrator reasserts the importance of storytelling. It's implied that the narrator is listening or transcribing the miller's story, and the narrator specifically is confronted with a downside of growing up: no longer being virile. Because of this, this passage shows the beginning, middle, and end of maturity.



Luo and the Little Seamstress swam out of the water, and the Seamstress fashioned a loincloth of leaves. Luo lounged in the sun while the Little Seamstress climbed the rocks around the pool. She climbed up to a tall rock and the miller secretly admired her body. The ravens returned and settled around her, but she brushed them aside and dove into the pool. The miller thought that he recognized Luo, and he finally realized later that he was the interpreter who accompanied the narrator to visit the mill.

The miller's tale shows that even when Luo and the Little Seamstress are together, the Little Seamstress is beginning to also seek independence, as she dives without Luo. The diving harkens back to Jean-Christophe, as it seems to be something she does for herself to fulfill her own needs and desires.



The miller tells the narrator that it's lucky for Luo that it was he who saw Luo and the Little Seamstress, as the miller has never reported anyone to the Public Security Office. He insists that if anyone else had seen them, they'd be in major trouble.

This is a somewhat unsettling end to the miller's tale, despite his assurance that he won't report the Little Seamstress and Luo. The discovery that the two are doing something wrong in the eyes of the law creates a sense of foreboding.



PART 3, CHAPTER 5

Luo says that he taught the Little Seamstress how to swim properly, not like a peasant. She taught herself, however, how to dive. Watching her makes Luo dizzy because of his fear of heights. He says his father used to say that dancing couldn't be taught, and Luo adds that he believes the same is true of diving and poetry.

In his own words, Luo continues to express disdain for the peasants, their way of life, and even the young woman he claims to love. However, the diving does force him to recognize the Little Seamstress's independence to an extent.



Luo describes his key ring, which holds the keys to his family's home in Chengdu, the master key that he and the narrator used to get into Four-Eyes' house, and several others. One afternoon, Luo read the Little Seamstress a chapter of Balzac's *Lost Illusions*. The Little Seamstress caught a tortoise, and Luo carved the novel's protagonists into its shell. When he released it, he wondered who would release him from the mountain and felt a wave of depression. Figuring he'd never use his keys again, Luo flung them into the pool.

Like the buffalo tail Four-Eyes tried to take home with him, Luo also collects trophies. Having the trophies and the memory of his city life in front of him in the form of the keys, however, only makes it seem less likely that Luo will ever make it home. This heightens his sense of limbo and purposelessness.



The Little Seamstress dove into the pool and was gone for a long time. Luo became agitated and finally swam down after her. He saw her rising from the bottom, his keys in her mouth. He tells the narrator that she was the only person who believed he'd be released from re-education and would need his keys again. He says they played this game of fetching the key ring from the bottom of the pool every time they met and he loved it, because he got to watch the Little Seamstress swim naked.

The way that Luo discusses the Little Seamstress here shows that, in many ways, he considers her relationship to him to be very similar to his relationship to the narrator. She's a supporting and supportive character, and Luo only thinks of his own fate. He never considers what her fate will be, regardless of their romantic relationship.



Luo tells the narrator that today, he and the Little Seamstress lost the key ring in the pool. It was dangerous and he says he doesn't want to go back to the pool ever again. He continues and says that when he got back to the village, he found a telegram saying that his mother is in the hospital. The headman is allowing Luo to take a month to sit with his mother. Luo remarks on the irony of returning home without his keys.

The headman's decision to allow Luo to go be with his mother suggests that the headman on some level values Luo's happiness. Notice that Luo doesn't mention any particulars about why he doesn't want to return to the pool. This is indicative of Luo's self-centered nature, as we'll learn soon that the "danger" is only danger to the Little Seamstress, not Luo.



PART 3, CHAPTER 6

The Little Seamstress tells the narrator that the books Luo read to her always made her want to dive. It was a gut reaction. She describes the depth of the pool, and says that Luo's keys always landed in roughly the same spot. She still had to be careful of the stones on the bottom, as some were jagged and sharp.

The Little Seamstress explains that she enjoyed diving to get Luo's keys because she likes pleasing Luo. She says she's not a silly dog playing fetch, or a French girl from Balzac's novels; she just likes diving and making Luo happy.

At the narrator's prodding, the Little Seamstress relates what happened on the last day she and Luo went to the pool. They swam a little and picnicked on the rocks while Luo told her about the heartbreaking part of [The Count of Monte Cristo](#) in which the protagonist's lover pretends not to recognize him. Luo and the Little Seamstress decided to act out the characters' reunion. She had a great time, and it was the first time she realized she could play the role of someone else but still be herself. Luo told her she'd make a great actress.

Then, it was time for the key ring game. Luo threw in his keys and the Little Seamstress dove after them and felt around the bottom of the pool. She touched a snake and retreated to the surface. A few minutes later, she dove back down because she couldn't stand the thought of leaving Luo's keys to a snake. She came back to the surface again, empty handed, before diving down once more. She finally spotted the key ring, but when she reached for it the snake bit her hand. She shows the mark to the narrator, and says the scar will be there the rest of her life.

PART 3, CHAPTER 7

The narrator says he would've had a grand time during Luo's month-long absence if Luo hadn't asked the narrator to guard the Little Seamstress. Luo explains that a number of young men on the mountain admire her, and will surely flock to her side in his absence. He tasks the narrator with spending as much time with the Little Seamstress as possible. The narrator is flattered that Luo would trust him with this task and never think that he'd steal the Little Seamstress for himself.

Remember that diving is something the Little Seamstress has learned how to do since beginning her relationship with Luo. She frames her acquisition of this skill as a testament to the transformative power of literature.



The Little Seamstress insists that diving is a simple pleasure, not anything that holds deeper meaning. Her desire to please Luo, though, is also indicative of Luo's own self-centeredness.



Remember how repressed the Little Seamstress's life has been up to the point of meeting Luo and the narrator. Her revelation here shows that even playing pretend isn't something that occurred to her to do. Her delight in it shows again that such things are universal, and further that they lead to a greater sense of self and maturity.



The Little Seamstress has never expressed fear of the government or its policies; her fears are tangible things like snakes. This is again indicative of her remote and rural upbringing. The snakebite and resulting scar will exist on her body as a physical marker of her coming of age, learning to swim, and her romance with Luo.



The narrator begins to flirt with the idea that taking the Little Seamstress for himself is fully possible and something he might even want to do. However, the narrator's loyal nature causes him to agree to Luo's request. With this, the narrator continues his habit of pushing his own desires away in favor of carrying out the wants and desires of others.



The narrator envisions himself as the leader of an army that's escorting a young wife across a desert to her beloved. He imagines the end of the journey when the lady runs into her husband's arms and the narrator faints from exhaustion. The narrator refers to himself as "the secret agent" and describes his daily walk to the Little Seamstress's house. He mentions that the ravens still observe the narrow part of the path. The narrator carries a hod that holds a novel, hidden among vegetables.

The narrator says that the Little Seamstress isn't aware she's being watched; she just thinks of the narrator as a "substitute reader." The narrator says that she seems to enjoy his style of reading to her, as he reads a few pages and then asks her what she thinks will happen next. Then, he tells her what the book says will happen, and embellishes when he feels the novel gets boring.

The tailor becomes used to the narrator's presence and also seems to enjoy the storytelling. Between chapters, the narrator offers to do chores like fetching water and cooking. The narrator says that thanks to the "respect for womanhood" he'd learned from Balzac, he even starts doing the Little Seamstress's laundry. He says that this "softened his temperament" and allowed him to intimately view the female realm.

One afternoon, the narrator applies crushed balsam flowers to the Little Seamstress's fingernails. She asks him where he learned this "girlish stuff," and he explains that he learned this trick of staining nails red from his mother. The narrator wants to ask the Little Seamstress if he can kiss her nails the next day, but he remembers his promise to Luo.

When the narrator leaves the Little Seamstress's house that night, 15 young men jealously follow him along the path and taunt him. The village cripple blocks the narrator's way and asks if he enjoys washing the Little Seamstress's underwear. Embarrassed, the narrator watches the cripple remove his pants and underwear and wave the dirty underwear at him. The narrator is so angry and embarrassed he's close to tears. He tries to swing the hod at the cripple's head, but he misses and the contents spill. The book and vegetables scatter.

These imaginings show how much the narrator's exposure to literature has transformed his thought process, as this style of narration is a major break from the style of the rest of the novel. Like the Little Seamstress in the pool, the narrator experiments with being other people (the secret agent) while still being himself, which shows how he's coming into himself and growing up.



Part of the narrator's coming of age happens as he continues experimenting with taking ownership and control of the stories he tells, both his own story (the novel as a whole) and Balzac's novels. At this point, he still remains loyal to Luo and the promise he made.



This shows another effect of the narrator's exposure to literature: learning about women. Unlike Luo, however, the narrator is stuck simply learning how women live and what chores they do, rather than learning about women sexually. This habit does act as a stand-in for the sexual activity the narrator desires, though.



The narrator can no longer pretend his feelings for the Little Seamstress don't exist, but he maintains his loyalty to Luo. He does ignore them though, and he keeps subsuming his own desires in favor of maintaining his loyalty to others.



The young men of the village obviously don't see the value in performing women's work for them. This demonstrates the youths' own lack of education (they haven't been learning from Balzac). It also exposes the narrator's attempts to impress the Little Seamstress as being somewhat ridiculous. The narrator will do anything besides actually taking control and telling the Seamstress how he feels.



The young men squat down around the book and look at Balzac's portrait. They ask the cripple if the portrait is of Karl Marx, Stalin, or Lenin, and the narrator suddenly shouts, "Don't touch," lunges for the book, and runs off with it. The youths throw stones at the narrator and one hits his ear hard enough to damage his hearing and draw blood. Eventually the young men give up, and the "secret agent" decides that he can't accomplish his mission.

In the house that night, the narrator can't escape the sense and smell of the damp or the pain in his ear. He tries to read, but can't concentrate because of the pain. The narrator stays up all night, imagining that the gang of young men are attacking him again. He pictures himself tied to a tree as the gang tortures him. The cripple slices off the narrator's ear, and the gang flees when the Little Seamstress bursts in.

The narrator imagines that the Little Seamstress unties him and allows him to lick her fingers, the nails red from the balsam juice. The balsam juice turns to lava that rolls down the narrator's chin, down his front, and finally enters his body through his navel. The narrator masturbates (which he terms a "betrayal") as the oil lamps die and the **alarm clock** shows midnight.

PART 3, CHAPTER 8

The next morning, the narrator and the Little Seamstress are in her kitchen cooking. She tells the narrator that she has a problem. The narrator asks if it's with the gang or with Luo, and she finally says that she's been throwing up and has missed two periods. The Little Seamstress starts to cry, which startles the narrator. Soon, he also starts to cry, though he tries to hide it from the Little Seamstress. He feels as though he's responsible for her pregnancy, and thinks he'd marry her himself if the law allowed it. He tries to get a glimpse of her stomach and is afraid.

The narrator explains to the reader that he forgot to ask the Little Seamstress if she wanted to be a teenage mother, although it wasn't even a valid question given that no medical professional would care for her: it's illegal to help an unmarried woman in labor. Further, she can't just marry Luo, as individuals must be 25 to get married. The narrator says that there's no way to help a "Romeo and his pregnant Juliet," as the Chinese dictatorship extends over the entire country.

The youths expose the extent of their education, which is entirely Communist. At least for them, the government's censorship has been successful, as they can only name these few Communist leaders and writers. The narrator keeps up his imaginings of himself as the secret agent, which makes the situation easier to handle by putting it in fictional terms.



The narrator is physically stifled by his own habit of ignoring his desires and being unwilling to take action. In his imagination, the Little Seamstress shows that she's loyal to the narrator by saving him. This suggests that what the narrator truly desires is loyalty from others.



The narrator's use of "betrayal" is questionable, as he hasn't yet actually given up on protecting the Little Seamstress from other suitors, or confessed his feelings for her himself. It's purely emotional, and shows that the narrator values loyalty of thoughts as much as actual acts of loyalty.



The narrator's reaction to the news shows that even if he saw masturbating as a betrayal, it was very inconsequential: he shows no indication that he'll abandon her or his promise to Luo. He does, however, go immediately to romanticizing her pregnancy, which again shows the effects of literature on his thought process. He mentally betrays Luo by admitting to himself he'd marry the Little Seamstress.



Even in the face of these impossible circumstances, the narrator continues to romanticize the Little Seamstress's predicament and put it in literary terms. Despite his inappropriately romantic thinking, this does bring him back to his loyal nature as he runs through all the possibilities of what to do.



The Little Seamstress and the narrator discuss how to procure an abortion that saves her and Luo from political punishment, particularly since the law prohibits abortion. The narrator dissuades the Little Seamstress from attempting to induce a miscarriage herself with herbs or bodily harm and finally agrees to travel to Yong Jing to find help at the hospital.

Stopping the Little Seamstress from trying to induce a miscarriage is a way for the narrator to perform his loyalty; he physically keeps her from the very real possibility that she'd hurt herself.



The narrator describes the hospital, which consists of two buildings. He sneaks into the building that houses the gynecology department and takes a seat in a hallway with a number of pregnant women. He tries to sneak a glance at the gynecologist when the consulting room door opens to admit a new patient. The patients shoot the narrator disapproving glances, and he realizes that they believe he has no business in the gynecology department.

Going on his own to gather information about getting an abortion will bring the narrator into adulthood, as this is his most overt display of taking individual action against the world à la Jean-Christophe. The narrator's youth and lack of foresight is obvious here; he never considered how silly he'd look in a gynecology department.



One of the patients rudely asks the narrator why he's there, and he feigns deafness. Another woman points to the narrator's still swollen ear, and the women argue amongst themselves about where the narrator needs to go. The gynecologist's door opens and the narrator gets another glimpse of the man, who looks about 40. He seems very tired and he is smoking.

Here, the narrator tries to create a different narrative about himself in the minds of the waiting women. He's acting, just as the Little Seamstress acted in the pool. This becomes a way for the narrator to experiment with his personal philosophy and begin to mature.



The narrator leaves the hospital and walks up and down the main street of Yong Jing. He thinks that perhaps if the gynecologist has met the narrator's father, who is a doctor, it could help his cause. The narrator thinks that if his father were in the gynecologist's shoes, he'd disown the narrator without even allowing him to explain that he's not the father of the child. The narrator remarks that the "bourgeois intellectuals" were just as morally strict as the communist regime.

The narrator realizes here that even within China, some of the guiding ideas are universal among both the Communists and the persecuted intellectuals. This continues to develop the idea of universality, but brings it out of a strictly literary and artistic realm. This in turn develops the narrator's growing personal philosophy, giving him the insight to develop a more adult worldview.



The narrator finds a meal at a restaurant, hoping to get the opportunity to speak to someone about how to find someone willing to perform an abortion. This yields no results. He tries to speak with the night watchman at the hospital, but the watchman refuses to speak about abortions for fear of imprisonment.

The watchman's fear mirrors the narrator's fear when he stole Four-Eyes' suitcase. It gives the sense that the government is always watching and listening; keeping silent is the only way to stay safe.



On the third day, the narrator decides to try to speak to the old preacher, who isn't allowed to practice his Christian faith and must sweep Yong Jing's streets as punishment. The narrator realizes that he hasn't seen the preacher and asks a street vendor about him. The vendor says the man has cancer and is at the hospital.

The preacher's fate of sweeping streets shows the results of China's Communist policies, and sets an example for others that punishment awaits those who insist on deviation from the prescribed path.



The narrator races to the hospital, where he's shocked to find the patients busy cooking their own lunches. He finally finds the preacher, surrounded by his two sons, who are trying desperately to get a tape recorder to work, and his wife, who's busy trying to make soup. The sons finally get the recorder to work. They beg the preacher to say something, even though the preacher seems to be in a great deal of pain. The preacher whispers something and then falls into a coma. The sons rewind the tape recorder and declare that the preacher's final words were a Latin prayer.

The narrator catches sight of the gynecologist outside the door and gets up to chase after him. A patient points the narrator to the emergency ward, where the gynecologist is attending to a man who lost all his fingers in a factory accident. The narrator enters the room and lights a cigarette for the gynecologist, who is methodically wrapping gauze around the man's hand. The narrator offers the patient a cigarette and helps the gynecologist wrap the man's hand. The man passes out from the anesthetic.

The gynecologist asks the narrator who he is. The narrator tells the gynecologist who his father is and says that his sister is having problems with her periods. The gynecologist coldly says that the narrator's father has no daughters, and tells the narrator to leave. As the narrator reaches the door, he turns around and offers the gynecologist a novel by Balzac if he can perform the abortion for the Little Seamstress. The gynecologist doubts that the narrator has a book by Balzac.

The narrator removes his sheepskin coat and offers it to the gynecologist. The gynecologist lights cigarettes for both of them as he reads, and explains to the narrator that the translator, Fu Lei, has also been labeled a class enemy. The narrator starts to cry, and explains to the reader that he was crying for Fu Lei, not for the Little Seamstress's predicament.

The next Thursday, the narrator and the Little Seamstress return to Yong Jing, the Little Seamstress disguised as a 30-year-old woman. The narrator waits in the hallway for three hours until he's called to a recovery ward. The abortion was a success, and the gynecologist tells the narrator that the fetus was female. The narrator gives the gynecologist both *Ursule Mirouët* and his beloved *Jean-Christophe*. The Little Seamstress is groggy, but doesn't want to rest before heading home.

The narrator is shocked because even the district hospital cannot hide how provincial and rural it is. The preacher's final words show him fulfilling the narrator's concept of a life well lived: his final words prove that he lives his individual truth, and takes action against the government with his final conscious breath. The preacher remains loyal to his faith to the end.



This shows again how provincial the hospital is; the gynecologist is curious but not particularly concerned about the random teenager helping him. The narrator shows the gynecologist that he's loyal by lighting a cigarette for him and helping, in hopes that this will help convince the gynecologist to return the favor.



The narrator's story proves ineffective; it doesn't allow him to gain any power over the gynecologist. When he offers the novel though, he puts novels through a test. If the gynecologist accepts, the novels will have power to create actual change in the world with their buying power. Not incidentally, the novel will have this power because it's censored and therefore rare.



When he starts to cry, the narrator is overwhelmed by the injustices wrought on the intellectual community by the government. This thought isn't necessarily a loyal thought to the Little Seamstress; this moment is one in which the narrator truly seems disloyal.



*By giving the gynecologist his beloved *Jean-Christophe*, the narrator demonstrates for the reader how emotionally tied up in the Little Seamstress and Luo's drama he is. Even though he's aware he's only a sidekick, he feels invested enough to give away his most prized possession. This is only significant for the narrator though; he doesn't demand any recognition for his sacrifice.*



The Little Seamstress insists on purchasing a kilo of tangerines to place on the preacher's grave to thank him for being the reason the narrator went back to the hospital and ended up meeting the gynecologist. The Little Seamstress and the narrator vow that someday they'll return to the preacher's grave and erect a carved portrait of the preacher as Jesus, but holding a broom. The Little Seamstress wants to give money to the Buddhist temple as well, but the building is locked and looks empty, and she has no more money.

The narrator and the Little Seamstress vow to remain loyal to the preacher. Their desire to erect the statue of Jesus mimics the poetess's belief that the ideals of the Revolution will pass. In this way, the narrator and the Little Seamstress show some maturity and adult insight by understanding that the future might be different from the present.



PART 3, CHAPTER 9

Addressing the reader, the narrator says that that's the story. Three months after the Little Seamstress's abortion and Luo's return, Luo and the narrator sit outside their house with the books spread in front of them. Luo, drunk and laughing, lights matches, and the narrator describes the characters catching fire. The narrator plays a sad song on his violin, and he remarks that not even a surprise appearance by the village headman would've stopped the book burning frenzy.

Something awful happened to drive Luo and the narrator to burn their beloved books. Notice how this passage is framed as both a public execution of the novels' characters, as well as an emotional funeral. This suggests that the boys have learned what they can from the novels and the characters.



The narrator says that the Little Seamstress had left suddenly and dramatically earlier that day. He explains that he and Luo had spent a lot of time looking back for signs that she was going to leave, and when they thought about it, there were several clothing-related clues. Two months earlier, she'd made herself a bra. Luo explained at the time that the Seamstress's "latest obsession" was to be like a city girl. The boys believed this was just vanity.

Though the narrator has developed the idea that the desire for clothing, like literature, is universal, here he suggests that specific clothing isn't necessarily universal. These particular garments point to the Little Seamstress's desire to take on the role of a city girl. The first step is clothing.



The narrator continues that the other two signs were the Mao-style jacket that the Little Seamstress had made for him to visit the miller the first time, which she'd altered into a smart-looking woman's jacket. She'd also asked the tailor to buy her a pair of white tennis shoes, which were completely impractical given the muddy ground on the mountain.

The Little Seamstress's clothing and footwear choices point again to her desire to not live on the mountain forever. The fact that Luo didn't see this to begin with shows that he only thought of the satisfaction he'd gain from "civilizing" the Little Seamstress; he never thought of what it would do to her.



On the western new year, which was a national holiday, the narrator and Luo had gone to see the Little Seamstress. When they entered her house, they were shocked to see that she'd cut her ponytail into a stylish bob. She was busy finishing her jacket and when she put it on, Luo and the narrator thought she looked "unfamilarly stylish and sensual," and the narrator remarks that the mountain girl was gone. Luo was thrilled with her transformation and whispered to the narrator that reading to the Little Seamstress definitely paid off.

Like the shoes, a bob is an impractical haircut compared to a ponytail. The Little Seamstress's acceptance of these impractical markers shows that she's preparing to leave her life of practical skills and knowledge for one that's based on more intellectual or intangible things. Luo still believes that he's the reason for the Little Seamstress's transformation.



The narrator says that the true result of the Little Seamstress's transformation hadn't occurred to Luo and himself at that point. He questions if they overestimated the power of love, or if they hadn't truly understood the novels they'd read to her. In February, Luo and the narrator are at work in a field when they hear shouts. When they run back to the village, the tailor greets them, looking ruffled and distraught.

The tailor says that the Little Seamstress left the mountain that morning—she'd gotten the documents to do so behind the tailor's back and told him that she intended to change her life and move to the city. She hadn't told Luo or the narrator, and the tailor tells the boys that he told his daughter to not come back.

Luo begins a headlong sprint down the mountainside after the Little Seamstress, and the narrator follows. As he runs he thinks about his nightmares where the Little Seamstress falls down the cliffs. He hears the red-beaked ravens and wonders why he's chasing after Luo. He can't decide if it's friendship, love for the Little Seamstress, or his desire to see the end of the drama.

After two hours, the narrator sees the Little Seamstress sitting by the graveyard where the narrator had met the poetess months earlier. He stops his descent and watches Luo fall to the ground in front of the Little Seamstress. The narrator watches the two sit silently as smoke rises from Luo's mouth. The narrator gathers some kindling, starts a fire, and buries some sweet potatoes in the fire. He muses that he's angry with the Little Seamstress. He says that he is aware that he is nothing more than a spectator, but he feels betrayed that she didn't tell him she was leaving. He feels as though he'll only ever be a friend of a friend to her, and that his help in arranging the abortion meant nothing to her.

The narrator hears Luo and the Little Seamstress speaking softly. They sound agitated and the narrator hears Balzac's name, but can't hear much else. Suddenly, the Little Seamstress jumps up and resumes her march down the mountainside. The narrator yells for her to wait and to have a sweet potato. The Little Seamstress starts running and disappears. Luo comes and sits with the narrator and tells him that the Little Seamstress said that she learned from Balzac that "a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price." Luo and the narrator burn the books hours later.

Luo and the narrator ignore the possibility that the Little Seamstress is internalizing and making her own decisions about the novels and what they mean to her life. That the narrator and Luo seem to have thought the Little Seamstress would stay on the mountain shows their selfishness and indicates a ridiculous belief that she'd be happy forever allowing Luo to read to her.



Unlike the narrator, who used the idea of individual action against the world to help others, the Little Seamstress uses that idea to help only herself. She's asserted her desire for ultimate independence, signaling her passage to adulthood.



The narrator acknowledges here that he's merely a casual observer to the relationship between Luo and the Little Seamstress. By dwelling on his nightmares, the narrator reinforces that the dreams themselves foreshadowed the Little Seamstress's break from himself and Luo.



For the final time, the narrator leaves the talking, negotiation, and discussion up to Luo rather than asserting his own desires. His anger at the Little Seamstress indicates that all he truly wanted was loyalty and acknowledgment for the help he gave her. This shows that the narrator believes loyalty and friendship are truly transactional, as he implies that the Little Seamstress owes her life (in which she's not pregnant or in jail) to the fact that the narrator arranged her abortion.



The Little Seamstress asserts her newfound independence and adulthood by abandoning her friends. The fact that she attributes her own coming of age to Balzac is a final testament to the transformative power of literature. While the boys only used literature to make their time on the mountain more pleasant, she actually took action and used literature to get off the mountain. Despite being a "simple mountain girl," she appears to be the only one who truly internalized the novels' sentiments.





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