

Guide to Balzac And the Little Chinese Seamstress

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Characters

Luo

Arguably the main character of BLCS, Luo takes a commanding role. Born as the son of a famous dentist, Luo was sent to the Phoenix Mountain village to be reeducated once his father fell from grace. As the narrator's best friend, Luo often accompanies the narrator on his misadventures and journeys but takes a larger role. In part one, the narrator remarks that "I am not exaggerating when I say that Luo was the best friend I ever had. We grew up together, shared all sorts of experiences, often tough ones. We very rarely quarreled" (5%). Not does this just show that Luo is a close friend but it shows that Luo and the narrator grew up together. The only time they feuded was when Luo punched the narrator after his father was publicly shamed. While both Luo and the narrator vie for the love of the Little Seamstress, she prefers Luo and has sexual relations with him and not the narrator. Luo additionally has a lot of charisma and has superior acting skills. However, Luo shares the narrator's love for good books.



The Little Seamstress

The Little Seamstress (real name never given) is the namesake of the book and one of it's most important characters. She is the daughter of the village tailor, a very powerful man in the village. She is notable for being the only person in the village to possess shoes. She is often defined by her separation from the village. She wants to be seen as intellectual and leave the village but she does not know how to read. She in many ways uses Luo and the Narrator to attain this and she leaves the village for the city. One of the most mentioned aspects of her is her beauty. As the narrator observes in part 1, "When [The Little Seamstress] leaned over her sewing machine, the shiny metal base mirrored the color of her white blouse, her oval face, and the sparkle in her eyes – without doubt the loveliest pair of eyes in the district of Yong Jing, if not the entire region" (12%). The little seamstress is the most beautiful person in the village and all the men in the district try to win her favor.



Four Eyes

Four eyes (named for his use of glasses) is one of the main antagonists of the book. While Luo and the narrator act in generally selfless ways towards each other and others, Four eyes (one of their friends) acts in a very selfish way. He acts selfishly by not sharing his secret books unless it is in his self interest. With his actions, he isolates himself from Luo and the Narrator and they end up robbing him for his books. He additionally lies pathologically in order to make himself look better. Four eyes is also extremely paranoid. According to the narrator, "Four eyes, who was eighteen years old at the time, lived in almost perpetual fear" (23%). Four eyes lives in a state of paranoia and fear so large that he always analyzes how people will perceive his actions and actively distrusts even friends like Luo and the Narrator. Four eyes' malicious plans end up working and he is freed early.



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Plot

Part 1

One quote to summarize part one comes from the narrator. "It was in early 1971 that we arrived at the village in a lost corner in the mountains and that I had played a violin for the headman" (3-4%). Luo and the narrator are shipped to a remote mountain village to be "reeducated" after their parents were outed as enemies of the people. The particular village they are sent to is the poorest of all of the villages near Phoenix Mountain. They begin to do manual labor such as shoveling excrement up and down a mountain and working in the brutal coal mines. They discover that by using their talents, namely using the violin and acting.



Part 2

In part two, the pace picks up. Luo and the Narrator meet Four Eyes who is hiding something. According to the narrator, "Four eyes had a secret suitcase, which he kept carefully hidden" (23%). They eventually find out what Four Eyes is hiding: High quality western books. They get him to give them some books by finding examples of local songs. When Four Eyes changes the songs to fit the Communist political agenda, the Narrator angrily punches him over the face. Four eyes ends up getting freed but before he leaves, Luo and the narrator steal all of his books. Luo reads the Little Seamstress many of these books, many of which are erotic. She and him have sex.



Part 3

In part three, the plot reaches a fever pitch. Luo and the Little Chinese Seamstress have sex in the lake deep in the forest. Even though they are both over 18, they nonetheless are charged with sex before marriage. The court hears from several people there, namely, Luo, The Little Seamstress, and a villager nearby. Luo soon after leaves to visit his Mom who has fell ill. In this time the Narrator is assigned to make sure that the Little Seamstress does not have a relationship with anybody else. During this time, she tearfully opens up to the narrator something really important: “‘I’m In trouble,’ said The Little Seamstress” (84%). The little seamstress is in trouble because she is pregnant. Although getting pregnant before marriage is illegal, so is abortion. Although abortion is hard to get, the narrator successfully obtains one for her. Soon after this, Luo comes back and the Little Seamstress leaves for the city without warning. The book closes as Luo and the narrator, in a drunken rage, burn down all of their books.



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Setting

Poverty

One key factor of the setting that Luo and the narrator find themselves in is consistent poverty. We see plenty examples of this. The hospital is critically underfunded, there is no school system, no one in the village has shoes, and there is lax safety in the mines. One ridiculous example of this phenomenon is the town's complete lack of any time keeping equipment. According to the narrator, "Before our arrival, there had never been an alarm clock in the village, indeed there had been no clocks or watches at all" (7%). This entire village, in the late 20 century, has a complete lack of time keeping devices. Think of how much ways to tell the time the average person has at their disposal. This should give an accurate sense of the level of poverty and isolation experienced by those living in Phoenix Mountain.



Forest Chasm

Another aspect of the setting that is often described in the book is a deep chasm on either side of a path. We get a description of it when the narrator describes crossing it: "A red-beaked raven [kept] watch as Luo crawled along a narrow track with a narrow chasm on either side" (58%). It is needless to say that such a passage is extremely dangerous. The path across the chasm is only wide enough for one person at a time and is very unstable.

Additionally, the chasms on either side are extremely deep. Due to this danger, Luo and the narrator repeatedly cross this ravine. Another symbolic aspect of this is the red-beaked raven which always appears. This raven and the raven itself as supposed to symbolize the ever-present possibility of death.



House on Stilts

One of the most common sights in the book is the House on Stilts. To hear the narrator put it, “We were assigned quarters in the very house of stilts where the village headman had inspected my violin... Underneath, in the space between the wooden props supporting the floor, was a pigsty occupied by a large plump sow” (7%). While being situated above a smelly and loud pig with no heating or AC does not inspire comfort, Luo and the narrator got used to it. The House on Stilts happens to also be very isolated, which how Luo and the narrator get to burn all their books next to it.



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Themes

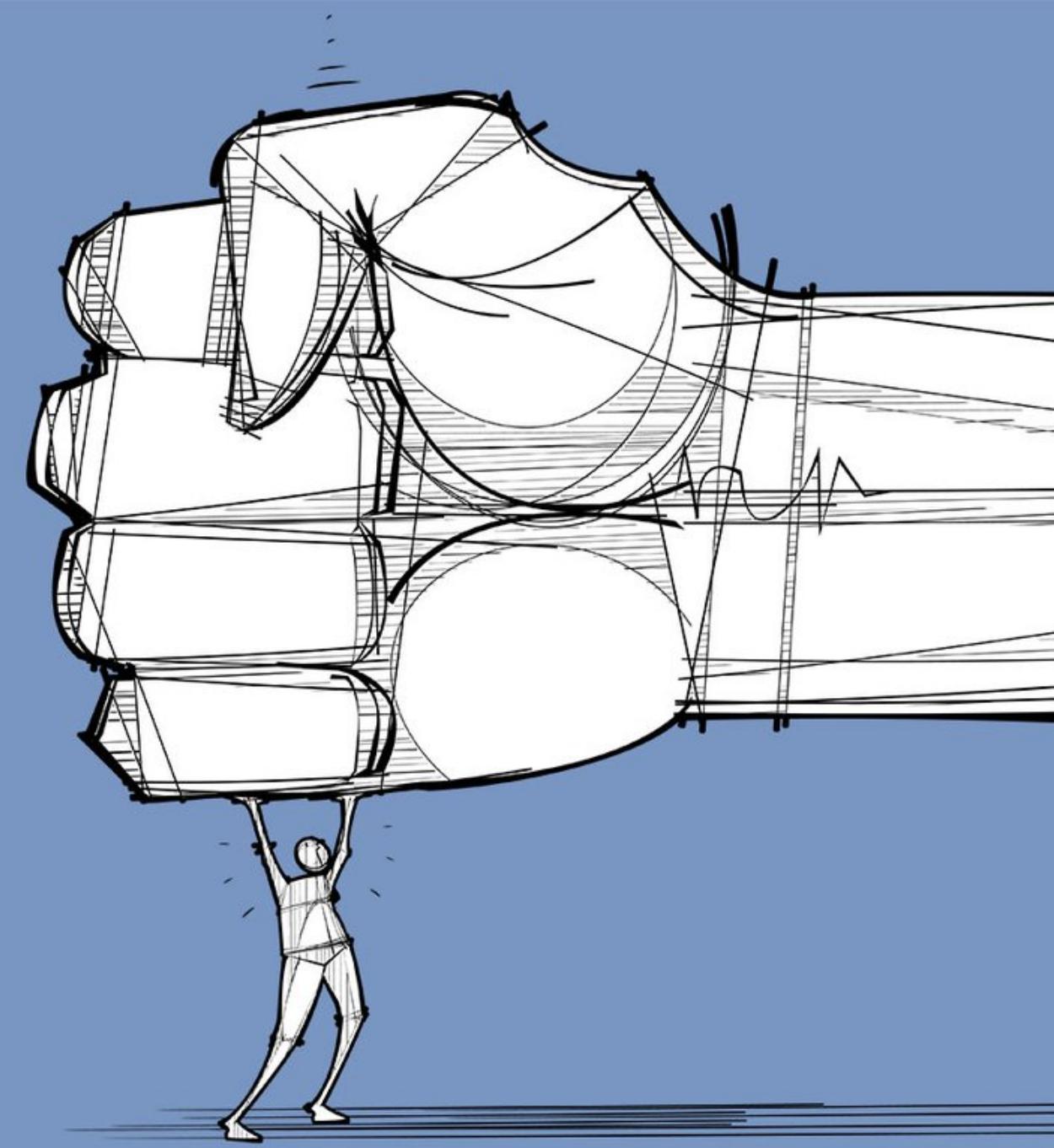
The Power of Storytelling

One of the main themes of BLCS is the power of storytelling to inspire and change. The first example that comes to mind of this theme is Luo and the narrator using storytelling (successfully) to woo the Little Seamstress. However, Luo and narrator use storytelling to make a ton of people act differently. They influenced the old tailor, the headman, the villagers, and most importantly, themselves. One example of this affect is Luo and the narrator's sexual awakening: "[T]he worlds of women, love, sex [had been] revealed to us by these western writers day after day, page after page" (57%). This shows the power of storytelling to transport our characters from their conservative and austere environment to a world of passionate, steamy love.



Dictatorship / Tyranny

One of the most common themes in BLCS is the tyranny of the Chinese Communist Party, especially under Mao Zedong. Dictatorship manifests itself in the narrator's forced expulsion from his house. Dictatorship manifests itself when all western books are banned. Dictatorship manifests itself when Luos father is publicly humiliated for making a gaffe. While tyranny definitely shows in the top-down actions of the state, it also shows in the actions and thoughts of the populace. We see this manifestation when we hear a man talking to his dying father, who was persecuted for being a christian, asking him to renounce his faith: "'If you could just repeat one of Chairman Mao's sayings – that would be perfect. Just a few words, or a slogan, go on, try! They'll know [you weren't] a reactionary after all, that [you have] put that all behind [you]' (91%). This shows how the revolutionary mindset has rotted everyone's brain that even when confronted with the death of one's own father, one tries to make sure said father sticks to the party line; it shows the cruel sadness in using your father's last seconds on earth to save your skin.'



Love

The themes of love, sex, and passion can be found all throughout BLCS. The theme manifests itself in the *specific* type of western literature Luo and the narrator posses. Instead of works of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, or even the Bible/Torah/Quran, they instead chose the erotic pages of Balzac. Additionally, most of part II and III revolves in some part around Luo having sexual relations with the Little Seamstress. As a villager nearby recounts: "I followed the two figures with my eyes, their bodies intertwined, whirling round and round in the water... They were coupling under water" (72-73%). This emphasis shows how love and sex are indeed big themes in BLCS.



Coming of Age

Coming of age means that a character slowly matures/changes during the course of a story. We see this theme with the Little Seamstress. While she is initially what appears to be a simple illiterate mountain girl, she evolves into an intellectual city girl. Her innocence goes away as she is exposed to the western world of passionate love and sex (“The unsophisticated mountain girl was gone without a trace” (98%)). Her exposure to western literature and her following metamorphoses are essentially the main plot point of the book.



Thank You for Reading!