

Balzac And The Little Chinese Seamstress Study Guide

BALZAC and the LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS

by Dai Sijie

You will need to finish your reading of Dai Sijie's novel by **Monday, June 14th**. As you read, you may want to keep some of the following questions in mind as we will be discussing them in class and on our Ning site.

Reading Schedule:

Part One (pages 3-41)
Thursday, June 3rd

Reflect on:

Early in the novel, the narrator says, "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 societies everywhere, whether socialist or capitalist, have done away with the old storytellers..." (18). Is storytelling a dying art? If so, what does this mean for literature and the boys' love of books?

Part Two (pages 45-105)
Monday, June 7th

When the narrator first reads Balzac, even though he's heard "nothing but revolutionary blather about patriotism, Communism, ideology and propaganda all his life," he is transformed by Balzac's story of "awakening desire, passion, impulsive action. . . . In spite of my complete ignorance of that distant land called France . . . Ursule's story rang as true as if it had been about my neighbours" (57). What is it that enables him to identify so strongly with characters and situations he has never experienced? What does his experience suggest about the power of literature? In what ways does *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* exert a similar power on its readers?

Part Three, 1st section
(pages 109-134)
Thursday, June 10th

As readers of Dai Sijie's novel, we know that the author has stated that the story is loosely autobiographical, with Dai Sijie's life experiences mirroring some of what the narrator experiences. If this is so, how does this complicate our reading of the story? How does this change the way we read and understand the relationship between Luo and the seamstress? Who ends up "winning" the seamstress - Luo or the narrator/author? Do you think he portrays the seamstress in a positive or negative way?

Part Three, Miller's Story - end
(pages 135-184)
Monday, June 14th

Throughout the novel, the repression of Western literature and culture is presented as something that is detrimental. Yet at the end of the story, when the Little Seamstress sets off for the city, she tells Luo that "she had learnt one thing from Balzac: that a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price" (184). How does this ending complicate the novel's apparent endorsement of cosmopolitan Western culture and literature over rural Chinese culture?

About the Author:

Born in China in 1954, Dai Sijie is a filmmaker who was himself "re-educated" between 1971 and 1974. He left China in 1984 for France, where he has lived and worked ever since. This, his first novel, was an overnight sensation when it appeared in France in 2000, becoming an immediate best-seller and winning five prizes. The book was also recently adapted into a film in France.



Is Literature Dangerous?

In March of 2002 Dai Sijie was a guest on the radio program All Things Considered and tackled the question, "Is literature dangerous?"

LISA SIMEONE, Host: In 1966 China changed. That was the year Chairman Mao Tse-tung launched the great proletarian cultural revolution, a sweeping and ultimately brutal reorganization of the entire society. Intellectuals were declared enemies of the state and imprisoned; their children were sent off to rural camps to be re-educated along party lines. All artifacts of Western culture, such as books and music, were banned. Though the cultural revolution officially ended in 1969 and Chinese universities reopened in 1970, re-education continued and the fear of being denounced went along with it. This is the setting for a new novella by Dai Sijie called *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. Dai Sijie himself was re-educated between 1971 and 1974. He left China in 1984 and settled in France, where he still lives. Dai Sijie joins us from Paris. Hello, Welcome.

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Introduction

"Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress" is a compelling novel by Sijie Dai that explores themes of love, identity, and the transformative power of literature. Set against the backdrop of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the story follows two young men, Luo and Ma, who are sent to a remote mountain village for re-education. In this study guide, we will delve into the key themes, characters, and motifs of the novel, providing a comprehensive overview to enhance understanding and appreciation of the text.

Plot Summary

The narrative unfolds in the early 1970s, during the Cultural Revolution, when China was undergoing significant political and social upheaval. Luo and Ma, two city boys, find themselves sent to a rural village for "re-education" through hard labor. There, they encounter the Little Seamstress, a beautiful and naive girl who becomes the object of their affections.

As they navigate the challenges of their new life, Luo and Ma discover a hidden cache of forbidden Western literature, including works by Balzac. The stories inspire them and ignite a passion for literature in the Little Seamstress, leading to a transformation not only in her character but also in their relationships.

Main Characters

Luo

Luo is one of the two protagonists and serves as the narrator for much of the story. He is intelligent, charismatic, and possesses a deep love for literature. His ability to tell stories and share ideas makes him a natural leader, and he plays a crucial role in the Little Seamstress's awakening.

Ma

Ma, the second protagonist, is Luo's best friend. He is more introspective and sensitive than Luo, which often places him in a supportive role. Ma is passionate about literature, and his friendship with Luo is essential to the development of the plot. His character represents the introspective and reflective aspects of the human experience.

The Little Seamstress

The Little Seamstress is a pivotal character in the story. Initially portrayed as innocent and uneducated, her exposure to literature transforms her into a more complex individual. She embodies the themes of beauty, desire, and the struggle for personal identity. Her relationship with Luo and Ma complicates as the story progresses, showcasing the impact of love and literature on her life.

Themes

Literature and Transformation

One of the central themes of the novel is the transformative power of literature. The boys' discovery of Western novels opens up new worlds for them and the Little Seamstress. In a society that restricts intellectual freedom, the characters find solace and inspiration in literature, leading to personal growth and self-discovery. Key points include:

- Escapism: Literature serves as an escape from the harsh realities of their lives.
- Identity Formation: The characters begin to define themselves through the stories they read.
- Empowerment: The Little Seamstress gains confidence and a sense of autonomy through her exposure to literature.

Love and Desire

The novel intricately weaves themes of love and desire throughout the narrative. The relationships between Luo, Ma, and the Little Seamstress highlight the complexities of romantic feelings in the face of societal restrictions. Key aspects include:

- Unrequited Love: Luo's affection for the Little Seamstress is met with challenges, illustrating the difficulties of young love.
- Jealousy and Rivalry: The friendship between Luo and Ma is tested by their mutual feelings for the Seamstress.
- Sexual Awakening: The characters experience a journey of sexual discovery, which is intricately tied to their emotional growth.

Rebellion and Conformity

The Cultural Revolution serves as a backdrop for the characters' struggles against conformity. The pressure to adhere to societal norms creates tension in their lives. Key points include:

- Resistance through Art: The boys' love for literature represents a form of rebellion against the oppressive regime.
- Personal vs. Political: The characters grapple with their desires in a society that stifles individuality.
- Cultural Identity: The novel raises questions about cultural heritage and the importance of preserving personal stories.

Motifs

Nature

Nature plays a significant role in the novel, serving as both a beautiful backdrop and a symbol of freedom. The mountain village represents isolation, but it also symbolizes the beauty of untainted landscapes. Key motifs include:

- The River: Represents the flow of time and change, reflecting the characters' journeys.
- The Mountains: Symbolize both the physical and emotional barriers the characters must overcome.

Forbidden Literature

The presence of forbidden literature is a recurring motif throughout the novel. The books symbolize freedom of thought and the pursuit of knowledge. Key aspects include:

- Censorship: The characters' connection to forbidden texts highlights the oppressive nature of their society.
- Discovery: The act of reading and sharing these texts becomes a transformative experience for the characters.

Symbolism

The Little Seamstress's Sewing

The act of sewing serves as a powerful symbol in the novel. It represents the Seamstress's role as a creator and a nurturer. As she learns to sew, she also begins to weave her own identity and narrative. This duality reflects her journey from innocence to self-awareness.

Balzac's Influence

Honoré de Balzac, a French novelist, symbolizes the bridge between cultures and the idea of a broader human experience. His works inspire the characters to think beyond their immediate circumstances and dream of a different life. Balzac's influence is a reminder of the universality of literature.

Discussion Questions

1. How does literature serve as a tool for rebellion in the novel?
2. In what ways do Luo and Ma's personalities complement each other throughout the story?

3. Discuss the transformation of the Little Seamstress. How does her character evolve from the beginning to the end of the novel?
4. What role does nature play in the characters' emotional journeys?
5. How does the theme of love complicate the friendships among the three main characters?

Conclusion

"Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress" is a rich and layered narrative that explores deep themes of love, identity, and the power of literature. Through the experiences of Luo, Ma, and the Little Seamstress, Sijie Dai crafts a poignant story that resonates with readers on multiple levels. This study guide serves as a resource for further exploration of the novel, encouraging readers to engage with its themes and characters in a meaningful way. As we reflect on the characters' journeys, we are reminded of the enduring power of stories to inspire, transform, and challenge societal norms.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress'?

The main theme is the power of storytelling and literature in transforming lives, particularly in the context of cultural repression during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Who are the two main characters in 'Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress'?

The two main characters are Luo and the Little Seamstress, who are childhood friends sent to the countryside for re-education.

How does the setting of the Chinese countryside impact the characters in the novel?

The rural setting serves as a backdrop for the characters' transformation, highlighting the contrast between their past urban lives and their imposed rural existence, thus emphasizing themes of isolation and self-discovery.

What role does literature play in the lives of Luo and the Little Seamstress?

Literature serves as a means of escape and empowerment for Luo and the Little Seamstress, allowing them to explore their identities and desires beyond the confines of their repressive environment.

How does the character of the Little Seamstress evolve throughout the story?

The Little Seamstress evolves from a naive and obedient girl to a more independent and assertive woman, influenced by the stories and ideas she encounters through Luo's readings.

What is the significance of Balzac in the title of the novel?

Balzac represents the ideals of romance, passion, and artistic freedom, which inspire the characters and symbolize the cultural richness that contrasts with their oppressive reality.

What is the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the characters' lives?

The Cultural Revolution imposes severe restrictions on personal freedoms, education, and cultural expression, shaping the characters' experiences and driving their desire for knowledge and self-expression.

What message does Dai Sijie convey about love and relationships in the novel?

Dai Sijie conveys that love is complex and often intertwined with societal pressures; it can both liberate and constrain individuals, highlighting the tension between personal desires and external expectations.

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