

Dimitri J. McKay

Major 20th Century Writers

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Love of Monsters

This paper is a Critical Analysis of Eight Novels: *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, *Perfume: The Story Of A Murderer* by Patrick Süskind, *The Patience Stone* by Atiq Rahimi, *Black Water* by Joyce Carol Oates and *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* by Sijie Dai and Ina Rilke.

The majority of our semester was about the oppression of women by powerful men, most of them monsters. The oppressors, the male characters of nearly all of our stories, shared something between them, power. That power was derived from political status, physical stature, social influence, sexual prowess or fiscal strength. The men in our stories were powerful. Women were often drawn to that power and became victims of it. Love became either a tactical event for survival or a strategic decision for long-term goals, but power was a vehicle for both their short-term or long-term future.

Though these two words, strategic and tactical are closely connected, they are very different. Strategy is the thinking process to change or organize something such as one's life. It defines a series of goals, which are desired, and the path to achieve them. It is often a compendium of complex multi-layered plans glued together with specific pre-set objectives, objectives that are tactical in nature. Tactics are the actions pursuant on the strategic plan. Tactics used by men and women to achieve their goal in love or in lust.

Men are drawn to women by their beauty or their sexuality. Women are drawn to men for their power. The following novels will detail the tactical actions, strategic goals and the monsters that oppressed the women they loved or lusted for.

Lolita

Our first novel, Nabokov's *Lolita*, is a tragicomedy of a middle-aged man and his romance with a prepubescent girl he calls Lolita. The beginning of the book sets the stage as to why

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Humbert Humbert (our main first man of power and also the narrator in the book) arrived at his final destination. It is a history lesson in self-absorption of a man who revels in strategy, though as time continues, his tactical attempts to move forward result in poor knee jerk reactions. Humbert Humbert spirals out of control, eventually losing his Lolita and according to the book, ending up in prison.

Lolita begins with a very unusual structure. It begins with our narrator at the end of our story setting the stage for the story by delving into the beginning of the story. It begins with Humbert talking about his childhood as justification for his misdeeds. It begins with Humbert defining his character and a framework for the story, yet it is a narrative that lives outside the standard dialogue, outside of the entire narrative framework, the audience is introduced to a crime. Not the explanation of the crime. Not the justification of the crime. Not the activity of the crime. The narrator is speaking to a jury and in speaking to the jury, he tells his tale of the precursor to Lolita, admitting that that there “may have been no Lolita at all had he not loved, one summer, a certain girl-child.” The precursor tryst becomes the foundation for Humbert’s obsession, his first sexual experience with his childhood sweetheart, Annabelle Leigh. Her premature death and his unconsummated love for her are implied to have caused his adult obsession with prepubescent girls. This moment in time defines whom Humbert Humbert becomes later in life, still bound by his obsession with Annabelle in her child state, the basis of his pathological adult mindset. His love of Annabelle defined the epitome of perfection in a lover and continued throughout his life. He never changed. His portrait of a lover remained exactly the same as he continued to age as if his emotions of love and lust were frozen in time.

Though the passage is a narrative, and thereby biased, the passage is plausible. It describes a natural scene of two children, exploring their early sexuality in the heat of a summer night. The author’s prose is rhythmic. The words used to describe Annabelle during the encounter are “trembled” and “twitched,” which imply the emotions of excitement and anxiousness, yet invoke

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images of Annabelle as delicate and frail. Humbert describes Annabelle as “faintly radiant” like the cluster of stars, which asserts that the universe, his emotions, and her body (under her frock) were raw and unprotected. He laid bare his body, his soul and his love. Humbert and Annabel’s intimacy was without barriers or borders between them.

Humbert, in this scene, is pleasuring Annabelle manually. Her face is that of “half pleasure, half pain” which implies that the physical “pain of love” is the virginal innocence of Annabelle, which is teeter tottering. Yet she is alone in her ecstasy because it is one sided. He is pleasuring her. It is not mutual, which leaves him wanting more and compounds his desire.

Humbert dominates Annabelle with his hands and she soon begins squeezing and grinding at his hand and arm. The squeezing of her legs trapping him, accepting him, and letting him go for just a moment, then trapping him again. She is entranced, almost zombie like, in her affection. This is where his emotional love began and he was willing to give up everything he had, and everything he was, for this love. The last line of the passage implies he put her hand on his manhood, the center of his passion and the tool of his lust. The narrator uses the term “awkward” to describe Annabel’s lack of sexual experience and her innocence. Then, in this moment of intimacy and pleasure, a screech of a cat suddenly tears it apart.

The language the author uses is vivid and descriptive, yet sometimes explicit. The reason for the chapter in the book is not to define an idea, but rather, to ask the reader to understand who and what created this monster in order to justify the future tale of pedophilia.

This moment defined Humbert. He yearned to return to this innocence, and to return to this moment and re-live this experience as an adult, repeatedly. This was the basis of his pathology and in spite of his intellect; his tactical ability to control those around him with was an ultimate failure. He was unable to erase his past, unable to let go of control and unable to change. Humbert was a prisoner to the past, and his constant longing to return to that innocent love he once had with Annabelle Leigh compromised his decisions and resulted in the final outcome.

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There were many twists and turns in this story. Humbert's final goal, through a series of tactical successes and failures, was to find that love again, even if just for a short time, with Lolita.

Humbert leveraged his social power as a father figure to Lolita, threatening her with foster care if she does not stay with him. If she goes to the police, he scares her into believing that she will become a ward of the state and will lose all of her belongings, thereby also framing his fiscal power. With these three elements he is able to control Lolita. But for Lolita, the decision to stay was survival, leveraging the only tools she had, her sexuality. She initiated their first sexual encounter as a way of drawing him closer so he wouldn't just toss her aside. Her sexuality was her survival. The decision to run off with Clare Quilty was also about survival. We are led to believe that Lolita was attracted to the social power of Clare Quilty, a famous playwright who had more social influence and much more fiscal power, however, after watching the movie *Ex Machina* (2015), I wondered if Clare Quilty was nothing more than a means of escape from Humbert for Lolita. This is driven further when Lolita reveals that she quickly left Quilty and went off on her own, quickly falling into the arms of another to support her. To further confirm her acknowledgement of Humbert's fiscal power, she sends him a letter asking for money, of which he obliges, even if just to know whom she ran off with initially.

Lolita may or may not have been attracted to Quilty, but he was her vehicle from a bad situation to what she could only hope was a better situation. Both of these men, Humbert and Quilty, used their social and fiscal power to attempt to control Lolita, and unfortunately, both attempts failed to achieve their strategic goals.

Love in the Time of Cholera

There was never a better example of long-term strategy than that of Florentino in the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*. He was born to love, lived to love and hoped to die in love with his beloved Fermina. Fermina did not choose Dr. Urbino because she loved him more. Quite the contrary, she loved him the same as Florentino, but he promised her much more in the

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way of personal material possessions, and as a woman who came from poverty, this was very appealing. Fermina was attracted to Dr. Urbino because he was socially and fiscally much more powerful than Florentino. Marriage, for Fermina, was a tactical decision to aid in achieving her strategic goal of living comfortably. This bred a special level of motivation in Florentino. Motivation resulted in him working hard to become rich and famous, thereby upping his attraction level with all women, which was a tactical goal for him to be rich and famous enough to deserve Fermina.

This mindset of Florentino made me think of a dialog from the movie *Buying the Cow* (2000):

Mike: “You see, scumming’s like fishing. If your dream girl were a fish what would she be?”

David: “I don't know, tuna?”

Mike: “Yeah! No. A marlin. A big trophy fish. You know to catch a marlin you have to use entirely different skills. I mean, you don't go out Marlin fishing with a sorry ass fold-out pole, six pound test. No. That'll do for bass, but it sure as shit ain't gonna land a Marlin. See you gotta up your game. You've got to know where the elusive beauties lie, you gotta know where to fish. They're rare brother, they're rare. Most days you don't catch shit but when you do...wham! The two of you are back at the dock takin' pictures.”

So, essentially, according to Mike, seducing lots of women will help you get your skill level up so that you can capture the trophy fish. But to do so you cannot go in unprepared. You have to have the right equipment. The equipment needed was social and fiscal power. And that is exactly what Florentino did. He made his life all about fishing. Not because he wanted to keep the fish he caught. He did not. He would catch and release. But he was able to fine-tune his skill-set for his Marlin... his trophy fish being Fermina. Florentino was preparing for the big game

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day... the day that Dr. Urbino would die. Each tactical action was nothing more than a stepping-stone toward the hand of Fermina.

Tactical movements and strategy were not lost on Dr. Urbino, however. He was a master strategist in his day-to-day activities. Dr. Urbino was a creature of habit and his life of repetition plays itself out like a broken record, each day beginning with a happy start. In the first chapter, the narrator outlined the doctor's schedule, line by line, and drove home the impression that the simple doctor took comfort in that repetition. Dr. Urbino appreciated little more than his wife, his parrot and the game of Chess.

Dr. Urbino's love of Chess speaks to his character. Chess is a game of strategy. Each tactical move is part of a strategy to stay multiple steps ahead of the competitor. By understanding, predicting and adapting to the opponent's moves is how one would achieve the strategic goal of winning. Dr. Urbino played Chess daily both as a board game and also in life.

It is said that in marriage, it is not the big difficulties that threaten matrimony, but rather, the day-to-day challenges and frustrations that do. Fermina and Dr. Urbino spent each morning in a sparring match where she would play the martyr who suffers through her husband's morning joy, tolerating his happiness and the racket he made groping around in the dark. Fermina put up with her husband's jubilant dawns even though he woke her up every morning. The author implies that the doctor is happy in his marriage and happy in his life. But all of this morning activity is a ruse. He was purposely making noise. Purposely starting a fight. Purposely sacrificing a pawn each morning, so Fermina could start her day with a sense of winning. He picked the fight so she had something to complain about. "Each new day was one more day he had won." She takes it personally that on each morning he wakes her with a cough. She believes he coughed just to wake her, and that his grumbling was a personal attack for the purpose of making her upset. This is the theme for our dear spoiled princess Fermina, a woman who

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despises her husband for his singular infidelity and wishes him dead for it. Unfortunately, Fermina misunderstood his daily morning intention.

The reality is that was not a fight. Fermina did not realize that she was winning the battle each and every day. Dr. Urbino was submitting without a fight. He made at least one noise to give her the opportunity to complain and to start each day with a victory. What man would incite an argument for the sake of giving his wife the pleasure of a morning victory? A man in love would.

Fermina is miserable. She is unhappy in her decisions, unhappy with her husband and unhappy with her life. The author describes her as stubborn and hard headed. She lacks the ability to admit when she is wrong and is unable to blame herself for any wrongdoing. She lacks the basic emotion of regret. Yet this hard outer shell is a façade, which was created when she lost her mother at a very young age. Fermina is tough, and demands respect. Although she was born into poverty, she has achieved a place in blue-blooded society and wants everyone to know that she belongs there. That was one of her personal strategic goals. She is portrayed as a woman of high society throughout the book. Marquez goes out of his way to describe Fermina as a strong and opinionated woman. And as such, he pits the husband and wife against each other as polar opposites on the same spectrum, two boxers, going round and round.

Fermina is not completely closed off to the world. There is a softer side to her, as the author describes her love of children and animals. With simple deduction, we know that she loved her husband (whom she treats like a baby) many years before, and now, she tolerates him. An example of tolerance was Fermina's act of picking out her husband's clothing each night for the following day. What began as an act of love had grown over-time into repetition. Her love changed from enchantment to misery, from passion to codependence.

The sequencing of this story is from the authors 3rd person, in a narrative which quickly moves from the present to a flashback for the majority of the book. The sentence structure is

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simple and compound sentences, which can be related back to the simple nature of each character. Florentino has a simple opinion of love and yet he is complex in that he is a horrific womanizer. Another example is Fermina's simple love of animals and complexity in her relationship with her husband. The doctor's life, however simple as he was, is complex because he maintains a hectic social and personal life, yet simply loves his wife completely.

A fantastic line that negates the theme of the book is "wisdom comes to us when it no longer can do any good", which implies that our view from the present is much different than looking back on the past if we have learned from our mistakes. And yet that wisdom cannot change anything. *In Love in the Time of Cholera*, Florentino makes countless mistakes, was an absolute monster to hundreds of women, yet does not have to suffer the consequence of those poor decisions. In the end, Florentino gets the girl. Fermina did not make any mistakes. She acquired the husband she desired, who offered her the life she desired, the status she desired and she was loved straight through until his end. There was no lesson learned by Fermina. The Doctor made one mistake but did not have much to suffer for as he admitted to and quickly ended the affair. If anything, the affair coming to light was a weight off of his chest.

Love in the Time of Cholera was a fantastic piece, full of twists and turns, opposites and equals, beginnings and endings. It is a story about undying and fleeting love. It is a story about equality and achievement. It is a story about the challenges of marriage and how one faces those challenges. It is a story about great matrimonial catastrophes and trivial everyday miseries.

The intersection between *Lolita* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* has some very basic similarities. Where our monster in *Lolita* was a man who was prisoner to his past affections, which then became his worst affliction, Florentino became the monster in *Love In The Time Of Cholera* where his love became a disease. Florentino was infected with it as a boy and as he grew, the disease spread within him. Florentino and Humbert were both brilliant men with endless strategies with which to make their way into the hearts of the women from their pasts.

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The difference, however, was that Humbert spent his days creating a woman in the image of another; Florentino, on the other hand, loved a woman who chose another.

What made Florentino a monster was his constant yearning for sexual healing. His promiscuity was over the top. He slept with as many women as he could in hopes that it would numb the pain stemming from of his love and rejection by Fermina as a boy. Any woman, for any reason, at any time, at any place, was ripe for conquest. Though this heartbreak created a monster, it also motivated Florentino to become the man he became. He immersed himself in work, became rich and powerful, so he felt like an equal to Dr. Urbino, and good enough for Fermina to love him. He had to be able to provide for the woman he loved, and so years of philandering taught him about women, what they yearn for, what they lust for, what they desire. He could fish for Marlin with this equipment, not play catch and release with an average trout.

Florentino had a strategy. That strategy was to out-live his competition. In his heart he knew with such conviction that Fermina would be his, that he would finally get the girl, that regardless of whom she chose, that love would conquer all. That was his flaw. That was his disease. That was his Cholera. The tactics he used to acquire his damsel, the love of his life, the center of his universe were simply to continue presenting himself, to the point that Fermina saw Florentino in her daily life so often that she began to forget about their ancient love affair.

After the death of Dr. Urbino, Florentino wrote love letters to Fermina constantly. She was livid at him for disrespecting her, disrespecting her late husband and disrespecting her marriage. Florentino was not easily dissuaded. He continued, regardless of the vulgar responses he received. He was unfazed by the insults. He continued to write until Fermina finally gave in. Fermina was, and always had been, the love of his life. She was the cure to his disease. Unfortunately, Lolita was not a cure for any disease, but rather, she was more like that “little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if you could stop tonguing it”.

Humbert could not help himself. What seemed like a fountain of youth was nothing more

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than a goblet of poison. Monsters come in many forms. In *Lolita*, our monsters were a pair of pedophiles who preyed on prepubescent girls. Although Humbert did so with the hope of rekindling the magic he felt as a boy, Clare Quilty was just a sexual deviant and a pervert. In *Love In The Time Of Cholera*, Florentino was a monster that broke the hearts of countless women as he trudged along, woman to woman, in the shadows, waiting patiently for his adversary to pass on so he could take what he believed to be rightfully his... the love and affection of his childhood sweetheart. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, all three of our main characters were able to achieve their desired strategic goals. For Dr. Urbino, it was Fermina's hand in marriage and happiness. For Fermina, it was a posh life, status and wealth. For Florentino, it was finally re-capturing the love of Fermina.0

Feast of the Goat

In the next novel, men of power consuming those without it, is one of the basic themes. The initial close contextual analysis was on Raphael Trujillo, a monster that seized political power in the Dominican Republic in 1930 and kept hold of that power with a dictator's grip for thirty-one years. But he is not the only oppressor in this tale. Our main character, Urania Cabral, lived under the same roof as a monster, her very own father.

Satan is often referred to as the Goat. His appetite is for absolute power. Satan is the embodiment of the seven deadly sins: Pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. If we examine each of these adjectives and compare them to Rafael Trujillo, they are an accurate description of him. Trujillo was the human embodiment of the Goat, so much so that he wore the nickname with pride. Llosa wrote him as a wicked, mischievously clever man, driven by self-will, yet hostile and obsessive compulsive. Virtue may inspire but evil is fascinating. The evil that Trujillo embodied was rampant in every way possible. That is the nature of dictatorship. Even if he did not wear the formal title himself, behind the scenes, he was the puppet master who

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controlled three million people of the Dominican Republic with violence and fear. He would pull people in with the care of a father and then destroy without hesitation.

One such victim was Senator Cabral, the father of our main character. Mr. Agustin Cabral, was a man who fell from grace in the eyes of the Goat, who was then stripped of his title and his post. His assets were frozen and his honor was stolen in one fell swoop. The reason, he never knew. He did not realize that the Goat suddenly decided that Senator Cabral was much too cocky and needed to be taught a lesson. Completely desperate, and with no idea as to why he had fallen from favor, he offered the Goat the one thing he had left, the virginity of his daughter. The Senator was a monster who offered his own child as an olive branch to be violently deflowered by a tyrant in hopes of returning to the inner circle for personal gain. The irony being that Trujillo was too impotent to actually go through with it, yet carried with him this memory to his grave, the memory of the girl who shamed him.

Feast of the Goat is a stark contrast to both *Lolita* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Although there was some level of objectification of women in each of these books, Humbert, Doctor Urbino and Florentino all cherished women. Each man lived his life around love. Humbert tried desperately to feel the same love he had felt for Annabelle in *Lolita*. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Dr. Urbino's last words to his wife before he died were professing his love to her.

Even Florentino, who had upwards of six hundred female "conquests", was all about love. He was driven by love. He was motivated by love. He was defined by love. But these men were at the opposite spectrum from Trujillo who saw women only as a life support system for their "cunt." They had little to no value aside from an object of temporary affection. His wife was described as bountiful, which either makes reference to her generosity or her stature, yet Trujillo cared not for his "sacred vows" as much as dressing himself well, which was the only religion he had been true to.

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Trujillo did not have sex for love. He had sex to exercise his power, for conquest, for machismo and for bragging rights. Llosa weaved a story around Trujillo defined by corruption, deviation and sexual perversion. It was clear that Trujillo was overcompensating for his hatred of himself, his impotency and his shame. He was a broken man who, at the top of a hierarchical society divided by rigid gender roles; he defined the nature of corruption and absolute power. The power he wielded was social, fiscal, political and physical.

It was interesting how Trujillo was able to speak to the people in the manner with which they spoke, like a snake charmer could speak to a cobra. From heads of state to the longshoremen on the docks, Trujillo spoke their language. From the stateroom to the barrio, with government officials to prostitutes, Trujillo made everyone feel special when he spoke to them because regardless of who you were, he spoke your language. This gave him power because it built support from each layer of the political and social onion.

Llosa's narrative was defined in three separate threads, which, when tied together, bound by equal parts fact and fiction, created a wonderful story. Although the book was in the position of a narrative, it is a plausible story. Like Trujillo, Llosa's rhythmic prose, compound sentences and explicit language were able to ground the story with the extra weight, which felt like reality. Llosa wrote how he spoke, the same way that we speak, not in short complete sentences, but as thoughts and ideas, as we do, building our confidence in his story because his language is the same as ours.

Llosa's description of Trujillo asks you to disregard how his actions have benefitted the Dominican Republic and to focus only on his misdeeds. Llosa does make mention of what Trujillo did for the people, even referring to him as the "benefactor," implying Trujillo was someone who helped people. That fact is acknowledged and then quickly dismissed. Trujillo was a tyrant. He is defined as a monster and that fact is what justifies Urania's position. With her hatred we are able to easily accept and justify the parallel thread of Trujillo's assassination and

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we too yearn for the death of the Goat. It also nullifies the pity you initially feel for Urania's father, Senator Cabral. He was a self-serving monster willing to give up his daughter for the sake of self-preservation and personal gain. He was willing to give up everything to re-gain his political, social and fiscal power, compromising even the safety of his family.

Both monsters failed in their long-term strategy to remain in power indefinitely. Senator Cabral was never able to regain his status in society or in politics. He lived out his life in misery, knowing that he sacrificed his daughter to the Goat and received nothing in return. Trujillo's long-term strategy was cut short when he was cut down by bullets, a fitting end for such a monster.

The Lover

The Lover is an acclaimed over-exaggerated semi-autobiographical novel written by Marguerite Duras, published at the tender age of seventy. This was her 48th work. It is a story of two star-crossed lovers, much like *Romeo and Juliet*, divided by their families, divided by social norms and divided by family tradition. In this case, however, the other factors working against them are age (she is merely fifteen years old and he is twenty seven) and their station in life (she is a poor high school student, and he is a rich older gentleman). This is a story of doomed love. This is a story of passion and desire. And it is a story of the inevitable pain that follows a broken heart.

The Lover is not written in a linear fashion. As a reader you are tossed to and fro, from the past, to the narrators present, from childhood to adulthood and from Saigon to Paris. The dramatic structure and sequencing in the story make it an emotional rollercoaster much like that of a pubescent girl. The main character, known only as "the little girl", dictates the narrative. Her lover, however, is known only as "the Chinese man from Cholon." We are never offered their names. Because of that, anyone could be the little girl or the Chinese man.

I wrote my initial analysis of the story through sobs and tears. I wrote the initial analysis

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with memories of love and loss. I wrote with a broken heart. I was led by hand into the story by its beautiful, breathtaking prose. The words were descriptive and visual. They were sometimes as complicated as our main character, the little girl. Sometimes the words and sentences were simple, fragmented, but elegant, like those spoken by our lovers. The story was both difficult to read due to the lack of single direction and easy to read because it was split so often along different stories, on different paths, on different timelines.

The book was boundless between time and space. The segmentation of the story, lack of linearity, and paragraph-long excerpts sometimes made sequences hard to understand. Flashbacks came sideways, without warning and without apology, yet they added to the narrative in relating madness back to young love.

Most consider Humbert Humbert and Quilty in *Lolita* to be monsters for their passion for pedophilia, but little is said of the Chinese man guilty of the same in *The Lover*. The stories are similar in that they both share the love of an underage girl, however, Humbert Humbert was a pedophile by definition, in his forties, based in perversion, without any conscience. He was a man who sought out prepubescent girls specifically, His taste in women unable to evolve. His primary driver and motivation was lust. The Chinese man, however, was bound by undying love.

In the spirit of Love by Monsters, this particular story is not as starkly contrasted as our previous stories. It is hard to identify the central monster in the story, though we can see the same power being wielded in order to capture and control, and the attraction by the young girl to that power. The Chinese man's power was financial, sexual and social. He was rich; his family was socially powerful, as they were the biggest landowners in the territory, and the sexual bond created between the young girl and the Chinese man when he took her virginity.

Initially we are presented with the Chinese man who was having sex with a minor more than half his age, however looking back, we might say that the little girls oldest brother was the monster. He stole constantly from his family, gambled and drank away their wealth and killed

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his younger brother. But the oldest brother played such a small part that he may be insignificant to the overall story. We may consider the young girl's mother to be the monster for accepting her daughters blossoming sexuality being offered in exchange for money as she had high hopes of escaping colonial life and escaping poverty. But much like Senator Cabral in *Feast of the Goat*, she too played a very minor part in the overall story.

We may be inclined to consider the Chinese man's father to be the monster as he was driven only by money and status. He wanted what he considered to be the best decision for his son and their family name, and he leveraged his financial power to force his son to conform. That is not an act of a monster. That is an act of being a loving father who wants the best future for his son. The Chinese man was blind-sided by his father's refusal to let him be with the young girl, and it breaks his heart, but he abides by his father's wishes.

The Lover made me reminisce of *Romeo & Juliet* without the dramatic final tragedy. The lover is a story in which our "Juliet" character does not realize her love for her Romeo until she is leaving him. Instead of poison and a knife to the chest, our lovers could not reveal their emotions even as they said goodbye. With tears and silence, they watched each other fade away. He sat behind mirrored glass, alone in his black limousine, staring out the window, watching his lover leave him. She stood against the ropes of the steam ship, the same as the day they had met. Life had gone full circle.

There was a consistent dichotomy between all things in this book, examples being the contrast of light and dark. Her white clothing opposed the darkness of his black suit. He had tanned skin contrasting her pale white flesh. She was a country girl where he was a city man. She was raised in poverty and him with wealth. He was driven by his physical attraction to her. She was driven by her fiscal attraction to him.

His lust for her made way for love. Yet she wanted to be his whore, not his wife. She was not interested in an emotional bond. She was drawn to his money, not his looks nor his

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demeanor. She was drawn to the power which money provides. The Chinese man understood the power of wealth. It was power that opens doors and opens legs. That is why he chose wealth over love. He gave in to his father demands. Yet he hated his father for not letting him have his little girl, the girl he loved, and for his father lacking sympathy and compassion. But the weight of his family name, his father's word, and the family wealth are what made the Chinese man's final decision. He paid for the little girl and her family to move to Paris, leaving him to marry the woman his parents had chosen for him, his financial and ethnic equal, another born into wealth, someone picked for him, someone he did not desire. His parents achieved their strategic goal by using the family wealth as a tactical weapon, the threat of which dictated the final outcome.

The story of *The Lover* shared the same downforce of power on the female character as others in the "Love of Monsters" theme for this class. In *Lolita*, Humbert used his parental and physical power to dominate Lolita. There was not a drop of equality. It was blatant one-sided dominance. Trujillo in *Feast of the Goat* used his political power to dominate the wives of many of his guard, cabinet and office. There was no power struggle. There was only lust and temporary possession. Trujillo was the top of the food chain and he used that as a weapon of domination. On the other side of that novel, Senator Cabral used his paternal power to sacrifice his daughter to the Goat in hopes of regaining his social, financial and political power.

In *Love in the time of Cholera*, Dr. Urbino used his wealth, education and social power to receive the hand of Fermina. In *The Lover*, our Chinese man uses his wealth to dominate the little girl. She resorts to prostituting herself to the Chinese man to provide for her family who, since her father's death, had fallen on the poverty side of the socioeconomic seesaw. The little girl used her sexual power against the Chinese man as a means of creating fiscal freedom, and as a vehicle to get her to Paris. These were tactical moves to get her started on her personal strategic goal: to write stories.

According to the little girl, that was all she ever wanted. As for the lover, his goals were

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never reached, as he was bound by the social taboos that plagued him. All the while, his decision to stay in his father's good graces was solely to be able to maintain his standing in line for the family wealth. He chose money instead of the girl, yet as readers, we have to wonder what happened after the final phone call where he professed his love for her. Did they pick up where they left off? Did they fall in love again? Or did they wish each other the best in life, say goodbye and go their separate ways again? Only the author could say for sure.

The Lover is a delightful short story about love and loss, and how social norms, family traditions; ambivalence between ethnicities in a colony, wealth, power and desire that can make or break two hearts intent on being one. The story ends with a simple message that he still loves her, even thirty years later, and he always will. True love lasts forever.

Perfume: The Story of a Murderer

Our next monster is an infamous one. He was a monster created in a vacuum without love. Love is not what drove him but love rejected him. He never felt the intimacy of love. He never basked in the warmth of affection. He never experienced the gentle touch of another. This was the recipe that created a monster named Grenouille. There was one specific moment when Grenouille suddenly comprehends the full extent of his olfactory senses and with that his God Complex was revealed. That moment reinforced his feelings of superiority and infallibility, which is ironic considering at the very same moment he realized he was completely and utterly evil.

Perfume: The Story of a Murderer begins with the narrator describing what could only be expressed as the most disgusting time and disgusting place on earth. The incredible detail of people's hygiene, or lack thereof, makes your stomach turn. You can nearly smell the wretch of rotting corpses, rotting fish and rotting teeth. The explicit detail of the environment is exquisite and adds color and context to the story. An example of which is the imagery of a baby born on the hottest day of the year, in a fish market, to a mother who regarded him as trash. This

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description adds a cornucopia of graphic elements which served as a baseline of what the world in the mid seventeenth century was. Paris was a disgusting place full of poverty, decay and death surrounding the majority of citizens living there during that time period.

Yet from the aristocrats to the plebeians, from the royalty to the indentured servants, to the uprising in power and wealth from the bourgeoisie, there is a cultural revolution in full swing. With that, a juxtaposition of culture and tradition exists everywhere. That juxtaposition adds flexibility to the story and to young Grenouille's future station in life.

Grenouille, our main character, exists on the extreme low end of the social spectrum. In the beginning of the book, Grenouille is loathed and feared by adults and children alike, yet he, himself, is essentially an underdog who survived out of "sheer spite and sheer malice." Yet, in his day-to-day on goings, Grenouille is just trying to survive in a cruel world where life has no value by everyone around him. This is exemplified in detail at the orphanage where children were taken in, not out of love, not out of compassion, but only for financial gain. The children are dehumanized, stacked on top of each other with the expectation that *some* will survive, but not all. There will be an acceptable loss. What a horrid upbringing!

Grenouille is sold to a tanner, again exploited for financial gain, where his life expectancy is five years, as that was the average lifespan of unskilled labor, and he survived despite the poisonous environment and abominable living conditions.

Grenouille is then sold to Baldini the Perfumer, where he becomes a prisoner by a selfish has-been looking only to use him for financial gain. During the single moment where Baldini could illustrate some compassion to young Grenouille, who lay on his death bed, Baldini exposes his motivation for helping was the fear that that Grenouille would die without sharing his priceless formulas. What a bastard! This is the boy that made Baldini rich beyond his greatest dreams, and yet he lacks the basic humanity to care for him when he is sick. His lack of appreciation is driven home when Grenouille has left, venturing out on his own, and Baldini

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admits that he is glad to be rid of the boy and that he never liked him.

As a reader, we feel compassion for the boy and his fight for survival. Although the world sees him as an outcast, as a freak, and an evil monster, the reader is forced to feel pity at the horrific conditions Grenouille is subjected to and as readers we feel empathy for him, for his physical deformities and his frightful outward appearance. He is, at the beginning, a flawed anti-hero.

Then the hammer drops. Then we quickly realize that we were wrong about Grenouille as we witness him killing a young girl for the sake of her scent. Not only does he kill her in cold blood, but lacks any and all remorse for it. He undresses her and consumes her, sniffing at each part of her body as if ingesting her soul. As a reader we are tossed into a tailspin where we want to be wrong about Grenouille, but he has revealed his true colors. He is as others have previously described. He is a monster. He does not languish in the reality that he murdered another human being, but rather, he is drunk on a little girl's scent like a vampire after their first taste of blood, after their first kill, after their first conquest. He does not even attempt to justify his action. He exists only for the result... her scent. Our sympathy ends with his childhood.

Like most monsters, the narrator calls Grenouille by only one name through the majority of the book, much like other monsters before him, monsters such as Dracula and Frankenstein. There is even a reference to Grenouille and his hunched posture suggesting a similarity to Grenouille and the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Grenouille, throughout more than fifty percent of the book, does not describe his image of himself outside of a few arrogant comments about his superior olfaction. He does not remark about the way he looks. He does not comment on how he walks. He does not detail his opinion of himself aside from his almost magical sense of smell. He does not describe himself as a good person or a bad person. He is, however, extremely goal oriented. He does for others for the sole purpose of achieving his own personal goals. Murdering beautiful young women are the tactical

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actions along with learning how to create perfume with Baldini and Madame Arnulfi are short destinations on the road to his final strategic goal... to create the most beautiful perfume in the world, made from the scent of the flesh of beautiful women.

The passage on page 161 is a turning point in the book and is fettered with irony. Grenouille has created a scent that lets him fit in with society, a scent based on cat feces, spoiled cheese and vinegar, which is exactly what Grenouille thinks of society. People are rotting, spoiled fecal matter. He views them as excrement. Yet when we look close, we realize that society has treated him the very same way. From his mother, to each of the wet nurses, to Terrier the priest, each discarded him. From Madame Gaillard of the orphanage, to Grimel and Baldini, they all treated him like fecal matter.

Grenouille, sitting in a church pew, realizes that humans are defenseless against scent. They are prisoners to it. They are susceptible to its affects whether they want to or not. Their nose is an open wound, exposed and unprotected. Grenouille realizes the power he has over them. It was not just his physical power, which he used against his victims. Nor was it financial or social power, or even political or mental... it was olfactory power, a power unlike any of the others in our stories through the semester. Because of this power, he looks down on humans. He abhors everything about them. So sitting in a house of god, he begins to devise his plans, to conceive his strategy, to formulate his manifesto and finally admits to himself that he is, in fact, thoroughly evil.

The disparity between this monster and several of the monsters of our previous books is love. Grenouille never loved his victims. He was a consumer. He objectified the women as nothing more than vessels for scent. Their scent was a trophy for his murderous greed and strategic goal of creating the perfect scent by mixing the scents of each together. But he never loved them. The same can be said for Trujillo in *Feast of the Goat* who was also a monster who objectified women, who was also a consumer, and his trophy was knowing and bragging that he

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had conquered these women. He loved no one, not even himself.

In *Lolita*, Humbert loved Lolita. He was a "detestable, abominable, criminal fraud," but he loved her. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Dr. Urbino loved Fermina until the moment he died. We consider Florentino to be a monster for objectifying so many women, for breaking so many hearts, but at the end, he had only one love, and that was Fermina. In *The Lover* the Chinese man loved the young girl, and she loved him, although it was too late when she realized it. One might consider him a monster for objectifying her at such a young age, but he did love her and loved her for the rest of his life. Does that make him a monster?

Grenouille, however, was a monster in its truest sense, as he was, at his core, evil. The fishmonger's bastard was born a monster, lived as a monster disguised as a child then lived disguised as a young adult, but a monster none-the-less. His lack of scent made him almost invisible. There was no love in his heart. He was filled with hatred, contempt and disgust. Yet we cannot expect Grenouille to be a good person when everyone he has ever known has exploited and dehumanized him. We cannot expect Grenouille to care about people when not a single person has shown him love or affection. We cannot expect Grenouille to appreciate others when no one has ever appreciated him. At least in each of the prior books, there was love shared at one time or another with the primary character. With Grenouille, there was no one. And so the boy born into a mad world went mad for the simplest of pleasures, the scent of a woman. Yet he was unable to love.

The closest Grenouille had to being loved was in his suicide. Upon arriving at his place of birth, the fish market in Paris, he poured his perfect perfume all over his body. To onlookers, he was bathed in beauty, and unlike every other character in the book, each of whom died a horrific undignified death, Grenouille chose when and where to end his life. For just a moment he experienced love, love by those he detested, a moment before they consumed him and made him a part of them, he was basked in love. Grenouille had been compared to a demon throughout

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the entire story, yet at the end; his death was comparable more to the transcendence of god correlating Grenouille body being consumed to the holy sacrament and the body of Christ. He is, at that moment, consumed instead of consumer. He is no longer pure evil. In that final moment, Grenouille too, experienced love.

Perhaps the final perfect perfume was Grenouille's strategic goal, and once achieved, he had nothing more to live for. Perhaps his strategic goal was to be accepted by, loved by, embraced by a society that loathed him since birth. It is hard to say, as the narrative never takes us in that direction, however, I like to think Grenouille suddenly felt overwhelmed with all of the evil deeds he had done and sacrificed the only thing he had in this world... his life.

The Patience Stone

Sometimes in life, the only goal one has is a short-term goal. Survival. Sometimes in life we struggle to live within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, because self-preservation is a series of tactical goals. Short term wins. Self-preservation equals survival. Without the basic needs being met, those basic needs become the only goal, the primary action item. Such is the story of the nameless woman in our next story.

In *The Patience Stone*, our main character is living a life of short tactical goals just to survive. Long before the Taliban arrived in Afghanistan, the Afghan society was skewed heavily toward the rights and privileges of the patriarch. Men are kings and women are the most beleaguered of society, struggling for the most basic of rights.

Being a woman in any war torn Muslim country is about survival. A woman without a husband is a woman without protection, without an ounce of value and without a chance. Tribal law denies women of education, denies women of healthcare and denies women their right to work. Women do not have independence. Freedom is a foreign and unfamiliar word. Add to that more than thirty years of war, a lack of a proper societal authority outside of religious anarchy and with any occupation comes the displacement of those whose lives live in the balance.

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In *The Patience Stone*, "The war on the streets is depicted, even though the entire tale unfolds within the confines of a single bedroom. The specter of the unnamed conflict, fought between never named factions, is the third character in the room." (loc. 35) We live as a fly on the wall of the shoddy downtrodden apartment and read about a woman who lives a series of tactical goals just to survive.

Our main character has no name. She is one of the many un-named women in a society where women do not deserve a name. They do not have status outside of "wife" or "sister" or "mother." But her husband does have a name. The patriarch does have status outside of husband, of brother, of father, for only the luck of having a penis.

The power of *The Patience Stone* is that we get a glimpse of an Afghan woman's life, a faceless, voiceless woman and we get a simple understanding of how she, like most women, are treated. For women, the only expectations are the expectations by her family, her husband's family, and the little that society have for her. Regardless of her own hopes and dreams, she is a prisoner of those expectations because of her vagina.

Our unnamed woman is no angel. She cannot be if she is to survive. "She is also flawed in fundamentally human ways, a woman capable of lying, manipulating, of being spiteful, a creature that, pushed hard enough, bares her teeth. And her body. Here, Rahimi has broached a great Afghan taboo, the notion of a woman as a sexual being." (Loc. 27) Which is why sleeping with another man to get pregnant in order to hide her husband's sterility was a tactical decision for survival. She would have been shamed, stoned or killed for not baring him children. She chose to survive by any means necessary, even if that was sex with a stranger in a brothel for the sole purpose of impregnation. That is why she takes no pause when claiming to be a prostitute and sleeping with a boy soldier within an arm's length of her comatose husband. This was a tactical decision. Not strategic. This is survival.

The male character, the comatose man that the nameless woman is caring for, is still

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cared for as the patriarch. Regardless of the way he has treated her, how he has misunderstood her or how he has neglected her, she pleads for his survival. Not because he is a wonderful man. Not because he is a wonderful father. Not because he is an excellent husband or even an excellent provider. No, she pleads for his survival because he is protection. He is a vehicle for survival.

Like some of the women in our prior reading, our primary female characters tend to rely on the power of the male for survival or fall victims to their power. That power could be financial, physical, sexual or a combination of each, but it is a common theme. *Lolita* was a victim of objectification by Humbert sexually, physically and financially, but Humbert had objectified all women after Annabelle Leigh. The difference was that *Lolita* needed him to survive. *Lolita* tolerated Humbert until she was able to escape. He was a means to an end. The young girl in *The Lover* relied on the Chinese man's financial and sexual power as her vehicle for escaping colonial life and pursuing her strategic goal of writing.

We also saw examples of women who fell victim to the sexual, physical or financial power of men. Examples being the droves of women who were sexually objectified by Florentino in *Love in the Time of Cholera* and each of Trujillo's conquests in *The Feast of the Goat* who fell victim to his power. Dozens of women were victimized by Grenouille in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* as he objectified them for their scent. They fell victim to his physical power, which is what he used to subdue and kill them. But this story is different.

In *The Patience Stone* we experience war as most do, completely helpless, in a constant state of fear, hearing bursts of gunfire, hearing the screams of those caught in the crossfire or directly in the crosshairs, and then the deafening silence. Through Rahimi, we are able to feel the impact of mortars destroying the streets, and destroying the nearby buildings and then the deafening silence. We feel the room shake, hearts race and the smell of fear. The author never takes us anywhere outside of the apartment in any detail, but only in memory. We do not bare

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witness to the fighting in the streets or the squabbles at the front lines. Yet, Rahimi gives us enough detail to understand the chaos of war, the senseless brutality of a war torn society, the helplessness of ordinary people. Rahimi illustrates the sheer random madness of it all.

We are witnesses to the confessions of our heroine, confessions to her love/hate relationship with religion, confessions of her sins, confessions of her challenges in marriage and in family. As a result, the last line in the book yanks us back into the cruel reality of her situation. The last line in the book is exactly what you would expect could happen in a society where women have no value. The husband awakes from his coma, having too been a witness to her bedroom confessional and chokes the life out of our nameless woman. The patriarch, enraged, exerts his patriarchal power, his physical power and his societal power to strangle the life out of her with his bare hands for exposing the truth.

The Patience Stone and our nameless heroine are the voice of not just the oppressed women in Afghanistan, but also many women throughout the Muslim world. Our nameless woman stands for other un-named women just like her, women who are objectified, criticized, abused, defamed, belittled, diminished, disparaged, hated, ignored and disregarded. Our nameless woman stands for those who struggle to survive on a daily basis, living tactical decision to tactical decision without a clear strategic goal outside of survival. *The Patience Stone* gives them a voice and the final word.

Black Water

Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1993, many have said that *Black Water* was Joyce Carol Oates's best work. It is a short book, weaving the past and the present together in a fluid, sometimes lucid, often skewed reality from the viewpoint of Kelly Kelleher, a twenty six year old Brown University graduate, driven by her own white guilt to help those less fortunate. She works for a public-service magazine; she volunteers to help illiterate adult students learn to read in Roxbury where she is terrified of being raped simply because she is young, white and female

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in bar none the worst neighborhood in Boston.

The story takes place, ironically, on Independence Day, the fourth of July, off the coast of Boothbay Harbor, Maine on a small island named Grayling Island. Kelly Kelleher is attending a party hosted by her childhood friend Buffy St. John and Buffy's current fling, Ray Annick, an older gentleman and a good friend to someone known only as "The Senator."

The Senator is a faceless yet powerful fifty-something year old politician, powerful in size, powerful in stature and powerful in status. He is a man who commands respect, commands full attention and is the subject of admiration for Kelly Kelleher. He was the subject of her college graduate thesis and her current object of desire. The Senator pays Kelly attention, he "chooses her", and gives her nearly all of his attention throughout the day. They are fond of each other, walking on the beach, kissing, and as he seduces her, they make plans to go back to his hotel, the Boothbay Marriott.

Later in the evening, they have plans to depart the party together. Yet, never once does Kelly think to herself 'He's really drunk. Perhaps I shouldn't get in a car with this guy.' Never once does she think 'Maybe we should just stay here for the night.' After all it was not as if Kelly did not have a room at Buffy's place. But no, Kelly decides if she does not go with him she will not have another chance with him in the future. So not only does she go with him, she gets him, at his request, another vodka tonic for the road.

The Senator is over-confident and reckless, racing to catch the next ferry, spilling his drink, throwing the rented Toyota around like a toy. He accidentally takes "old" Ferry Road instead of the "new" Ferry Road, and in a series of poor decisions ends up crashing through a guardrail into a marsh, landing the car on the passenger side, trapping Kelly in the car while it slowly fills with water.

The Senator, in a panic, escapes, accidentally kicking Kelly in the head as he abandons the vehicle, ignoring her pleas for help, as she grabs at him, at his leg, at his pants and finally at his

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shoes. All she is left with is a single LL Bean shoe... and this is the second element of the story; the drowning. This is where the story begins and the story ends. This is where Kelly, delirious from hitting her head against the window glass, confused as to her situation as it all happened so fast, and hallucinatory about what was taking place outside the car throughout the book. The story is woven together between flashbacks of her past, nostalgia of her as a girl with her grandfather, memories as a teenager and her politically polar opposite father, reminiscing about her life as a college student where her classmate attempted suicide and recalling the day's events up until the present.

The story was haunting, very much one sided, and tells the story from the viewpoint of Kelly. It is a simple message. Man=bad. Girl=good. Parts are confusing, as I'm sure they were written to be, as from the viewpoint of Kelly, she was confused at the sounds, disoriented by the situation and her desire to live kept her thinking positively. But did the Senator come back for her? Was he outside the car pulling at the door attempting to open it? Was he outside the windshield attempting to get her out? Was he trying to save her? Or did she imagine all of it?

Black Water is a story of a smart girl making stupid decisions in hopes of self-promotion. She is not with the Senator for his good looks, as it is clearly stated that he is not an attractive man. But Kelly is attracted to his political, physical, financial and social power. Kelly is attracted to his status and station in life. Kelly is attracted to the idea of the Senator falling in love with her and the two of them being together. She wants to be part of his life, part of his inner circle; she wants to be part of his campaign for President. Kelly sees the Senator's interest in her as an opportunity for self-advancement, but it starts with the intimacy.

We learn that the senator makes it to shore and does not go back to help. He does not try to save her. He simply makes his way back to the main road and calls his friend, the attorney, for help. He makes no attempt to save Kelly. His primary motivation was to save his own self-

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centered ass. He is concerned about his career, not the life of the girl. He is fearful of what his political opponents will say about the incident. However, with the entire story being narrated from the side of Kelly, I would ask what we know to be true. Is this another vivid hallucination much like that of Kelly waking in the hospital after being rescued, her parents both very young, watching her being saved? We do not know what is real and what is not, as Kelly drifts in and out of consciousness. We know only what we are told from the side of the good girl in an absolute nightmare as her life comes to an end, or at least, what we think is her life coming to an end, repeatedly, and then told she would survive, repeatedly.

I struggled through the story, the one-sided nature of it, the vending machine generic description of the charismatic Senator, faceless, nameless, lacking depth, yet Kelly finds him to be that much more than she initially expects him to be, but he's not. Is her standard of a U.S. Senator so low that a man giving her an ounce of attention, the potential for intimacy, and the possibilities of her future could be turned by a few kisses and a little conversation? I struggled at the fact that we know nothing of the villain, the ambiguous horrible, self-serving man, married but separated, gentle yet coarse, warm yet condescending. The Senator is a predatory monster by all accounts, yet in Kelly's eyes, he could do no wrong, straight until the moment of her death.

Within the theme of women attracted to the power of men, Kelly, a victim who has fallen for that power, dies because of it. Common sense was disregarded because of selfishness and self-interest. His potential political influence was worth the risk of dying at the hands of a drunk driver. Kelly is another victim, in a series of victims. In *The Lover*, Duras paints the little girl as a victim of circumstance, a victim of her mother's pity and her brother's abuse. Lolita is victimized sexually in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Llosa portrays Urania as a victim, like all women who had been sexually objectified by Trujillo and by her father, both of which used their physical, parental or political power for their own benefit in *The Feast of the Goat*.

While we are on the topic of women victimized as sexual objects, who worse than

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Florentino in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, who had his way with hundreds of women. Were they not victims to his promises of love? Were they not victims of his social and fiscal power? He was the epitome of womanizer. Lastly, the fate of all of the female victims who died at the hands of Grenouille, all for the sake of the scent of their beauty in Süskind's *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*.

Kelly's life, in an instant, was cut short. All of her achievements up until that moment were for naught. Due to her inability to make better decisions, blinded by her daddy issues and using this chance meeting with the Senator as a tactical opportunity, she paid with her life. A series of unfortunate events led to that final fatal moment. Meanwhile, the Senator, that selfish monster, ran off to save his own life and career at the expense of another. Kelly is but another victim to the attraction that comes with powerful men/monsters.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

Chairman Mao Zedong had a lasting impression on China, which we still see the results of today. In what was called the "Cultural Revolution" of the 1960's and '70s, hundreds of thousands of city dwelling citizens were sent to peasant villages for "re-education", which ironically, was more like "de-education". The author, Dai Sijie, was a product of this re-education and with first hand knowledge wrote a charming piece, originally in French, translated to English, but all very Chinese.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress is an enchanting read about the magic of books and the power of storytelling. It is a coming of age tale about personal pride, the end of innocence and romantic awakening. Written by Dai Sijie, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is a story about two teenagers during China's cultural revolution. The narrator and his childhood best friend Luo "a.k.a. the storyteller" are sent to a mountain called the "Phoenix of the Sky" where they are to be "re-educated". Not because of crimes they personally committed, not because of actions they had personally taken, but ironically, because their parents

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were considered enemies of the state.

The narrator, Ma as he is called, is the son of two doctors. Ma is a leader and almost a caretaker of the little seamstress when it is revealed that she is pregnant and he must help her get an abortion or they will both face charges because she is too young to have a child. It is interesting to note that in the Mandarin Chinese language “Ma”, depending on the tone with which it is spoken or the characters written, can mean “horse,” “mother,” “anger” or be the inflection at the end of a sentence transforming it from a statement to a question. All of which can ring true for our intellectual little seventeen year old boy whose anger, we soon find, is at the re-education as a concept, the communist party and his current situation. He is, however, as steadfast as a horse.

Luo, in Mandarin Chinese, depending on the tone, can mean “To arrange,” “silk,” “to collect” and “to display.” All of which also seem to fit our young storyteller. He collects and arranges stories with which to share with the local mountain people. Then he “displays” them in such a manner to make them additionally entertaining. And like silk, he is soft and beautiful yet strong. Luo’s father was a famous dentist who claimed to have one worked on Chairman Mao’s teeth, and because of that, is considered a class enemy, and has been the subject of extensive public humiliation.

Two of the major themes of the book are academic and practical knowledge. Books drive much of the plotline along with the life experiences that education can impart. When Luo and the narrator first arrive in the village, they soon realize that formal education, knowledge of city life and culture are big differentiators between them and the locals. They feel superior to the villagers because of that, yet they soon learn that they are not superior, but different.

The villagers have a different set of skills that are more useful locally. Where the narrator can play the piano, which is considered a form of high art, the tailor’s sewing too, is an art form. Though the author talked of self-enrichment, he also makes mention the more practical skills of

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village life. Although the villagers are mostly illiterate, the narrator and Luo have the opportunity to leverage their own skillset as storytellers to enrich the lives of the locals, stimulate and entertain them, and the narrator too sees this as a form of art.

Culture is also major theme, regardless of whether it is eastern or western culture. The western novels and their themes are a major driver in the book. Free thought, individual freedom and libertarianism are what the Chinese authorities fear most. Strategically this mentality can cultivate all sorts of ideas, ideas that can challenge the status quo. The elimination of anything that might promote those thoughts and ideas is of the highest priority to the authorities in order to squelch any potential uprising before it happens. This creates an ominous Orwellian fear among the citizens.

The novel spends the majority of the time concerned with beauty of literature, the art of story-telling, and “beauty” (the natural beauty of the mountain, the beauty of women and the beauty of music). The author does also press upon the audience the fact that one of the worst parts of the Chinese Cultural Revolution was depriving the people of beauty. They were deprived of beauty in art, beauty in people and beauty in education. Through these books, our little Chinese seamstress recognizes her beauty and accepts it. She recognizes her potential and the value that it has. She recognizes the fact that a woman’s beauty is also her power and that power is priceless. This results in the little seamstress blossoming like a rose.

We see those themes repeated throughout the book, an example being when the narrator and Luo, are attempting to “liberate” the books from the “oppression” of their suitcase. The pair express resentment and loathing “for everyone who kept these books from us.” Although initially we may consider Four-Eyes to be the oppressor due to his implied selfishness, the message is also clear that the Communist government is loathed because they banned books in the first place. This suggests that education is critical to revealing to people what life is and what life could be like. Without books, the boys would be unable to realize how repressed they are under

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Chairman Mao and what freedom really means. They resent the Communist Party and the society that prohibits that freedom.

Much like George Orwell's *1984*, by limiting education, the party can reinforce their control over the public. In *1984* we were introduced to "newspeak". Newspeak was the practice of removing words from the language, one at a time, slowly over time. Without words society is dumbed down one word at a time. This was a similar theme in the book *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (which was published decades before the Chinese Cultural Revolution). There, in a dystopian future, the authoritative government actively destroyed books. This practice dumbed down society by first destroying education, resulting in the destruction of culture, which then destroys the ability to dream and removes any glimmer of hope. Without an educated and motivated society, there is no ability or inspiration to overthrow the government. Chairman Mao followed the same roadmap as Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* and George Orwell in *1984*. One single truth holds true: Totalitarian states feed on the ignorance of its populace.

There is an underlying paradox that runs as a sub-narrative in the story linking each of the themes together. It begins with Luo and his patronizing attitude toward the "simple" seamstress. Luo sees her as uneducated and less beautiful than the women from the city and therefore he feels he is superior to her. Luo looks down upon her and yet he plans to "transform the little seamstress" from a simple mountain girl to something better. He taught her the proper way to speak, he taught her the proper way to swim, he taught her about the beauty and pricelessness of women, not through his own knowledge, but knowledge gleaned out of the western novels.

"This fellow Balzac is a wizard. . . . He touched the head of this mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed, carried away in a dream. It took a while for her to come down to earth. 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." – Luo (p. 62)

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Luo's arrogance and condescending rhetoric is apparent when he speaks of "this fellow Balzac" as if they were equals. Luo truly feels he is superior to her and the rest of the "uncivilized peasants." Luo sees the little seamstress as nothing more than an uneducated and uncivilized child in dire need of direction, but only his direction. He downplays her perception, interpretation and understanding of the stories. The little seamstress is quickly transformed from a literary equal to more sophisticated than Luo himself. She gleaned more from the books than Luo did. They inspired her to change her own life, to leave her own village and to leave her old persona for a new. Luo unintentionally transformed the little seamstress from a caterpillar into a butterfly, and then watched her fly away.

What began with Luo claiming, "She's not civilized, at least not enough for me!" (p.27) to the little seamstress saving Luo's life when he contracted malaria with a traditional remedy made of an herbal poultice, the story goes full circle. It is a classic underdog story.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress was a very different story when compared to the others we read this semester. Much like *The Patience Stone* our characters were just trying to live their lives. There was no big strategic goal outside of living. Without a strategic goal, there was just a list of small tactical decisions made, some of them successful, some not.

The love story reminded me of *The Lover* where we had a young girl fraternizing with someone who we originally see as someone of power. Luo and the narrators perceived power was not fiscal, nor was it political, but because both were more educated and from the city, we may consider their power to be intellectual and social.

In their eyes, as they perceived themselves, that would appear to be true. The irony, of course, was that their intellectual power was worth little in a place where skill and experience had more value. Up until the boys started spending time with the little seamstress, they were very low on the social hierarchy. In a way, while the little seamstress was benefiting from the enrichment of the books, the boys were benefiting from her local knowledge and local social

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standard. It was a mutually beneficial relationship, much like the little girl and the Chinese man in *The Lover*.

Unlike Lolita, a single man did not oppress our female lead in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. Instead, the local government and the totalitarian snitch society oppressed her, as it oppressed everyone else. She lived in fear, ignorant of the world, and doing what she could do to survive. She lived her life one day at a time, just like our nameless and faceless woman in *The Patience Stone*.

The only correlation that can be made of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* and the other texts is that interpreted power and actual power remained fleeting to nearly all parties. Self-preservation was held above all else and love was fleeting. We can view Luo similarly to the Senator as for him, the seamstress was something to do, she was not someone to save for the purpose of saving but to use for his own entertainment. The seamstress however, unlike Lolita, learned as much as she could in order to get herself out of her situation, she was used once, but then achieved her freedom, she did not have to rely on another to escape like Lolita did. She used her survival skills to achieve the final strategic goal of freedom. This is a goal that no other woman achieved in the previous books, it is fitting to finally see that in the end, it is not the money or power that was needed but education.

How would Lolita have been different if she was able to educate herself? Would the nameless woman in *The Patience Stone* have a different life if education was even an option? Kelly was educated, but her downfall was that she valued power over her own education, resulting in the cause of her demise. The little girl in *The Lover* can be viewed similarly to the seamstress, as she used the power the Chinese man gave her via his money to get herself to Paris where we can assume that she had to rely on her education to get by in life, however, it is unclear as she could have just found herself another powerful man there. It was fitting to end the semester with this story as we looked at power throughout the semester, yes, the characters were

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all powerful men, but the victimized woman did not realize that they had power too, that of love, of lust and the power of a man's wanting.

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