Border Town: Chapters 5 – 8

“The ferryman understood; she was at war with herself, torn between her own desire for fun and her love of him” (Chapter Seven, p51)

Knowledge Check

Can you answer these questions from memory? If not, skim and scan chapters 5 – 8 to find the answers. Discuss your findings with a classmate or your teacher; record the significance of these moments in the novel:

1. What do Shunshun and Cuicui’s grandfather discuss in chapter 5?

   • Significance:

2. At the beginning of chapter 6 Cuicui’s grandfather has a disagreement with a passenger. What is the disagreement about and how is it resolved?

   • Significance:

3. Describe Cuicui’s internal conflict at the start of Chapter 7:

   • Significance:
4. Describe Cuicui’s grandfather’s thoughts throughout chapter 7. What is he worried about?

- **Significance:**

5. Who does Cuicui memorably encounter in chapter 8? Describe this person:

- **Significance:**

6. How does chapter 8 end?

- **Significance:**

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**Discussion Point: the military**

“Daring and fun loving soldiers, stripped to the waist, came waving their lanterns and beating their drums as packs of little firecrackers dangling from poles sent sparks down their backs and shoulders like rain showers” (p40)

How does Shen Congwen present the soldiers from the garrison stationed in Chadong? How are they described? How do they fit into the community? What do the mentions of soldiers reveal about Shen Congwen’s attitude towards the military?
Important Symbolism: *distant sounds*

Cuicui is a character poised on the cusp of maturity. During this section, Shen Congwen describes her body changing from that of a girl into a young woman. He writes on page 53, “*the passage of time was ripening her*” and “*her girl’s body had now completely filled out*.” On the same page she begins menstruating, a symbol of coming adulthood. Alongside her growing physical maturity, Cuicui begins to develop emotionally as well. However, Cuicui struggles to recognize new emotions she has never experienced before. Perhaps because she grew up without a mother, she lacks anybody to guide her through her physical and emotional changes. Therefore, she finds herself “torn” between her past self – who lived in happy isolation with her grandfather – and her “*own desire for fun.*” (p51)

Her grandfather sees what is happening to Cuicui, but he struggles to articulate his worries. While he wants to make her happy, during this section of the novel he often keeps his thoughts and concerns to himself. For example, on page 52 Congwen describes him: “*He just stood on the high crag, watching Cuicui and waving at her silently.*” While at this point in the story this is a worry for the future, her grandfather knows time is running short. He knows that, in order to live a happy and fulfilled life, she will have to leave him soon. In order to express this growing urgency, Shen Congen repeatedly has distant sounds drift across the river and ‘intrude’ into their peaceful idyllic house. Cuicui often overhears sounds that stir emotions that she cannot yet understand; nevertheless, she is tempted and even excited by the feelings these sounds evoke.

- Create a small quotation bank of *distant sounds* from chapters 4 - 8:

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“She stood with him on the hilltop and listened for the longest time, letting those entrancing drumbeats carry her away to a festival in the past” (p28)
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Literary Context: the influence of Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud has been called the ‘father of modern psychology.’ Although Freudian psychology is an entire field of study in itself, for the purposes of this literary study, in a nutshell, Freud believed that people disguise disturbing impulses by substituting acceptable symbolic objects to stand in for latent thoughts and fears, such as nakedness, birth, death and a few others. The richest collection of symbols, according to Freud, were substitutes for sexual thoughts. For example, the penis (also called the phallus) can be represented by long and upright objects such as sticks, umbrellas, poles and trees.

In the introduction to Border Town, Jeffrey C. Kinkley (a Shen scholar and his biographer) writes:

“Shen Congwen spoke of Freudian influences in Border Town, possibly referring to Cuicui’s dreams and daydreams, the flute and white pagoda a phalli, or Tianbao and Nuosong as Ego and Id. Although Shen later wrote erotic... stories, international readers typically see Border Town as a conservative work full of idyllic and nostalgic visions and devoted to an exquisite painterly style... the vitality and rawness of youth, balanced by art and nature, creates tension in much of his writing.”

A careful reader of Border Town will notice a faint-but-unmistakeable Freudian influence in Congwen’s writing, manifested in Cuicui’s thoughts and dreams. Unaccustomed to romantic thoughts of love and desire, untaught by her mother who died when she was only a baby, and sheltered from the wider world by her grandfather, Cuicui cannot yet understand these symbols. But an alert reader will sense the ‘tension’ in her thoughts and interpret objects from the novel as ‘Freudian symbols’ of sexual desire.

Create a list of symbols from the novel so far that have Freudian interpretations.

For example:

- “Cuicui plucked a scallion with a big stem to use as a whistle.” (p52) In historical Chinese literature, the scallion has occasionally been used as a symbol of sexual desire.