Themes in *Chinese Cinderella*

**Family and relationships**

Adeline is not so much disliked by her family as ignored. She is blamed for the death of her mother and therefore her siblings feel their family situation is her fault. ‘If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.’ (pg. 3) Adeline has no close friends or confidants. She has a close relationship with her Aunt Baba, but not with her school friends. Adeline holds herself apart from her peers in an effort to project the false impression that she has a happy family life. Adeline’s relationship with her father exists only through her school performances or her misbehaviour. At other times, Adeline is barely acknowledged and rarely appreciated.

**Abandonment and loneliness**

Adeline has a close relationship only with Aunt Baba. Even then their contact is limited when she is abruptly sent to boarding school in Tianjin. Adeline is almost forgotten by her family and left in an increasingly hostile Tianjin. Her circumstances change only when her step-aunt collects her from the convent and takes her to Hong Kong. Adeline often feels left out of things with her siblings and, instead of attaining their approval for her school effort, she receives their scorn. Her friendship with her pet duck, PLT, best illustrates Adeline’s feelings of isolation and loneliness: ‘It comforted me to know I was needed.’ (page 84) The loneliness Adeline felt at home was also felt at school, despite her pursuit of academic glory, because her friendships were empty of truth – she confided in no-one about her family situation. Despite the lack of true openness with her friends, the loyalty and support that she received from them was often the only thing that kept Adeline from utter despair, which suggests that a strong network of friends may be helpful in coping with trauma and may in some cases be able to compensate for a lack of family support.

**Self-esteem**

This novel explores the effect of Adeline’s abusive and neglectful childhood on her sense of self-worth. There are many examples of poor self-esteem in the novel. Adeline is made to feel constantly on the outside by her family. She is rarely included in the family circle and when she is included, even slightly, she is overjoyed. When Adeline is the focus of a cruel joke by her brothers, she is saddened by Third Brother’s involvement. Adeline’s father only notices her when she has performed well in school. Attention from her father usually raises Adeline’s self-esteem, while the long stretches of time when Adeline is ignored by her father has the opposite effect. Adeline is constantly insulted by Niang and even told, ‘you are nothing without your father’ (page 130). Despite the trauma she endures, Adeline is eventually able to rise above her circumstances and realise that her self-worth is based on her own abilities and strengths, and that she can create her own future without the approval or acceptance of her family.

**The Power of Stories**

Although Adeline stumbles into writing stories “by accident,” she is immediately drawn to the ability to reshape the world around her. In reading stories, she can hear other people express many of the pained emotions she has long felt but been unable to voice, offering a reprieve from the “horrors of my daily life”, and she uses her written stories to reimagine herself as bold and powerful rather than powerless and afraid. This becomes a way to escape from her dismal childhood, demonstrating the power of stories and how they can play an important role in helping individuals process and handle abuse or trauma, and counteract the negative messages they receive from others.

**Themes**

Events that occur in the plot of a story may indicate its themes. Use the story to find events that illustrate the themes and choose a quote to support your choice. You will find that some themes overlap.

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| **Family & relationships** | **Abandonment & loneliness** | **Self-esteem** | **Power of Stories** |
| *Example:*  Adeline is unhappy with her family life but does not tell anyone out of embarrassment.  ‘They didn’t know that, in front of them, I was desperate to keep up the pretence that I came from a normal, loving family.’ (page 63) | *Example:*  Adeline wonders what her fate will be when she is punished for her friends visiting her. She is constantly afraid of being made an orphan.  ‘What’s going to happen to me? Will I be sold?’(page 131) | *Example:*  Adeline is constantly reminded that the treatment of her and her siblings is her fault (despite that not really being true).  ‘If you had not been born, mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.’(page 3) | *Example:*  Adeline writes stories about herself as the strong and courageous warrior Mulan. ‘When I wrote, I forgot that I was  an unwanted daughter who had caused  her mother’s death. Instead, I could be  anybody I wished to be’ (page 122) |
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Linking Quotations to Themes

Some of the main themes in *Chinese Cinderella* are family and relationships, abandonment and loneliness, self-esteem, and the power of stories. You may notice others as well.

Read the quotes below, identify which theme each relates to and explain how it illustrates that theme.

| **Quote** | **How quote relates to theme(s)** |
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| ‘If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.’ (page 3) | This quote relates to the theme of self-esteem.  The reader feels sorry for Adeline. It’s easy to see why she doesn’t feel good about herself and carries guilt if she is constantly spoken to in this way. |
| ‘Continue studying hard and bringing honour to the Yen family name so we can be proud of you.’ (page 11) |  |
| ‘Unlike my siblings, no-one looked down on me.’ (Refers to people at school) (page 14) |  |
| ‘I was winning the medal every week and wearing it constantly… it was the only way to make father take notice and be proud of me.’ (page 16) |  |
| ‘To her we are not separate people. Over here, we have become one single unit known as *all of you*’. (page 28) |  |
| ‘One by one they were greeted and led away by anxious mothers. Nobody came for me.’ (page 30) |  |
| ‘In my narratives, I poured out everything that I  dared not say out loud.’ (page 122) |  |
| ‘We merely want you to acknowledge your errors in the past… We’ll only give you the tram fares if you are truly contrite.’ (page 45) |  |
| ‘In no time at all big sister went over to the other side. I knew Niang loathed me and despised my aunt.’ (page 59) |  |
| ‘They didn’t know that, in front of them, I was desperate to keep up the pretence that I came from a normal, loving family.’ (page 63) |  |
| ‘It all stems from mama dying when you were born…things were much nicer when she was alive. You made her go away’. (page 74) |  |
| ‘What was it that bothered me…it was the loss of the nicest parts of Third Brother that saddened me.’ (page 80) |  |
| ‘I took the duckling to my heart…it comforted me to know I was needed.’ (page 84) |  |
| ‘As soon as I heard Aunt Baba’s footsteps, I started feeling better immediately.’ (page 91) |  |
| ‘I only took yours because you’re the one least likely to give me trouble afterwards.’ (page 97) |  |
| I imagined Niang introducing me to a strange man and ordering me to marry him. The thought filled me with horror and fear.’ (page 100) |  |
| ‘For the first time she was nice to me and I felt very close to her.’ (page 104) |  |
| To be left in peace with Cordelia, Regan, Gonoril and Lear himself—characters more real than my family back home or my schoolmates downstairs. The rhythm! The story! The magical words! What happiness! What comfort! (page 347) |  |
| ‘Nothing will ever come of you…you don’t belong in this house.’ (page 113) |  |
| ‘I don’t want her to grow up like Big Sister. She is going to be different.’ (page 122) |  |
| ‘Now they knew the pathetic truth! Unwanted and unloved by my parents! How long did take for a person to die of shame?’ (page 129) |  |
| ‘The thought of being separated from my aunt filled me with dread.’ (page 131) |  |
| ‘…does he truly hate me or is he just going along with her because he loves her more and wants a peaceful life?’ (page 133) |  |
| ‘Groups of girls would gather around me during recess to discuss my stories, or to hear me read  aloud the latest escapades of my imaginary heroines.’ (page 122) |  |
| ‘I was such a nobody that he didn’t remember my name.’ (page 3) |  |
| “That’s right! Nothing! I don’t think any of my features are good. That’s what I mean.”  “And that’s your honest opinion of yourself?” Rachel asked.  “Yes! That’s it. Everything is ugly. I loathe myself.” (page 386) |  |
| ‘I felt I was part of the Schilling family and no longer the unwanted daughter who always came last.’ (page 161) |  |
| ‘I was overjoyed! Not only had Niang finally acknowledged me, she had given me a task to perform!’ (page 169) |  |
| ‘Together, we watched the car drive off. I was overwhelmed by his chivalry, but could find no words sufficient to express my gratitude.’ (page 177) |  |
| ‘In my narratives, I poured out everything that I  dared not say out loud.’ (page 122) |  |
| ‘No way will I ever allow myself to be the object of anyone’s charity or pity.’ (page 194) |  |
| ‘Into her lips, I injected my loneliness, isolation and feelings of being unwanted. To my heroine, I gave everything of myself.’ (page 210) |  |
| ‘I was looking uglier and uglier as I grew older and taller.’ (page 213) |  |
| ‘I wondered why he was being so nice.’ (page 218) |  |
| ‘For once, he was proud of me…My whole being vibrated with all the joy in the world.’ (page 220) |  |