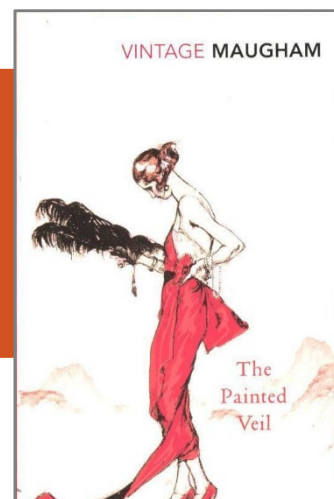




The Painted Veil

W. Somerset Maugham



Author Background

William Somerset Maugham (25 January 1874 – 16 December 1965) was an English playwright, novelist, and short story writer. He was among the most popular writers of his era and reputedly the highest-paid author during the 1930s.

Both Maugham's parents died before he was 10, and the orphaned boy was raised by a paternal uncle who was emotionally cold. He did not want to become a lawyer like other men in his family, so he trained and qualified as a physician. His first novel *Liza of Lambeth* (1897) sold out so rapidly that Maugham gave up medicine to write full-time.

During the First World War, he served with the Red Cross and in the ambulance corps before being recruited in 1916 into the British Secret Intelligence Service. He worked for the service in Switzerland and Russia before the October Revolution of 1917 in the Russian Empire. During and after the war, he travelled in India, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. He drew from those experiences in his later short stories and novels.

Book Summary

Kitty, beautiful, spoiled Kitty has married fairly “well” in order not to be left on the shelf forever. Walter, sweet, sincere, but achingly dull, has offered her a secure if not wildly passionate life in Hong Kong, where he is posted as a bacteriologist. Once there, Kitty makes up for the lack of passion in her marriage through her adulterous affair with Charlie, the charming and handsome assistant colonial secretary, an appropriately glamorous post - much more exciting than being a bacteriologist.

However, in the opening scene (perhaps one of the best opening scenes in literature), Walter has found out about Kitty and her lover. Kitty ends up in the cholera-stricken area of China, where she is forced to deal with a life that doesn't revolve around superficial beauty and charm, a life where Kitty will need to dig deep within herself to find resources that she may just not even have.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Did you like *The Painted Veil*? Why or why not?
- ❖ Kitty Fane. Walter Fane. Charles Townsend. Dorothy Townsend. Mr. Garstin and Mrs. Garstin. Waddington and the Manchu lady. How are each of these people similar/different? How do their relationships differ? Who is this novel about?
- ❖ Kitty. In what ways did Kitty change through the novel?
- ❖ Themes. What is the theme of *The Painted Veil*? Some possibilities: Adultery, understanding one's self/growing up; understanding others; reconciliation and forgiveness; Feminism.
- ❖ The 1920s. What impact has the era (1920s) on the novel? How would this have been different (if a similar story were even possible) in modern times?
- ❖ England. Hong Kong. Southern China. What is the significance of each location? How did each location change Kitty? The novel comes full circle by returning to each location as the novel winds down. Why?
- ❖ Compare and contrast the characters of Walter and Mr. Garstin, and their respective relationships to Kitty.
- ❖ What is the quality the nuns have which distinguishes them from everyone else in Kitty's mind?
- ❖ Is the novel an endorsement of Christianity?
- ❖ What is Maugham's attitude towards Eastern religions, as depicted in this book? What is the significance of this?
- ❖ Explain the relationship between Waddington and Kitty.
- ❖ What is the new path Kitty has discovered that is mentioned in the closing words of the novel?

References

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