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The Painted Veil



Synopsis

The Painted Veil is a 1925 novel by British author W. Somerset Maugham. The title is taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet which begins "Lift not the painted veil which those who live Call Life". The biographer Richard Cordell notes that the book was influenced by Maugham's study of science and his work as a houseman at St Thomas' Hospital. In the Preface to his book, Maugham tells how originally the main characters were called Lane not Fane but a couple of that name in Hong Kong successfully sued the magazine publishers of the initial serialised version for libel and won £250. To avoid similar problems after A. G. M. Fletcher, the then Assistant Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong, also threatened legal action, the name of the colony was changed to Tching-Yen.[2] Later editions reverted to Hong Kong but the name Fane was kept for all editions. The novel was first published in serialised form in five issues of Cosmopolitan (November 1924 to March 1925). Beginning in May 1925, it was serialised in the United Kingdom in eight parts in Nash's Magazine. Somerset Maugham uses a third-person limited, point of view in this story, where Kitty is the focal character. Kitty Garstin, a very pretty upper-middle class debutante, squanders her early youth amusing herself at cotillions and social events during which her domineering mother attempts to arrange a "brilliant match" for her. By age 25, Kitty has flirted with and declined the marriage proposals of dozens of suitors. Her mother, convinced that her eldest daughter has "missed her market", urges Kitty to settle for the rather odd Walter Fane, a bacteriologist and M.D., who is madly in love with Kitty. In a panic that her much younger and less attractive sister, Doris, will upstage her by marrying first, Kitty consents to Walter's ardent marriage proposition with the words, "I suppose so." Shortly before Doris's much grander wedding, Kitty and Walter depart as newlyweds to his post in Hong Kong.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I wanted to read this book before seeing the movie, and I must say that I enjoyed it immensely. Having read most of Maugham's short stories but none of his novels, I was taken aback by the sweep and passion of this book, its strong moral center, and above all its sensitivity to feeling. Other readers have called this a feminist work, and so in a halting way it is, in that Kitty Fane, its central character, is a woman and Maugham looks unusually deeply into her soul. But at the beginning of the book she is almost the polar opposite of feminist, having been brought up by her ambitious middle-class mother to be pretty and vapid and catch a good husband. It is only after she has passed through the climax of the story that she begins to see that there can be better goals in life for a woman. My surprise at the depth of Maugham's portrayal of Kitty is in contrast to what I have always seen as the emotional reticence of his male characters, who are portrayed rather in terms of action than of feeling; I see this as a by-product of the author's homosexuality in an era when this had to be kept hidden. Kitty's husband, Walter Fane, a young government doctor and bacteriologist in Hong Kong, though presumably heterosexual, is almost a caricature of this repressed type. Although he obviously has feelings, he is almost incapable of giving voice to them, and neither he nor Kitty can effectively communicate with one another. It is hardly surprising that Kitty should fall into an affair with a married colonial official who is all easy charm. Even when Walter discovers their liaison (masterfully evoked in the opening pages of the book), he remains cold and inscrutable; his response is to volunteer for service in a cholera-ravaged city in the Chinese interior and to take Kitty with him.

The kernel of this novel dates back to 1895 when Maugham was twenty years old and stayed in Florence to learn Italian. He came across a story in which a "husband suspecting his wife of adultery and afraid on account of her family to put her to death, took her down to his castle in the Maremma the noxious vapours of which he was confident would do the trick; but she took so long to die that he grew impatient and had her thrown out of the window." It is around this core (which is not exactly the plot line of the novel, don't worry) that Maugham developed the story of Kitty Fane, a woman who is vain, superficial and in need of appreciation. It is a story that plays in Hong Kong and China in the 1920s. Maugham knew both places from his extensive travels in the South East but, characteristically for him, he does not spill much ink on descriptions of the landscape or the natives,

which is a pity. He is much more interested in his fictitious characters. As always, Maugham is a master of drawing characters who possess all the self-importance, weakness, and suffering that underlie human existence. His characterizations are so sardonically true that he was sued two times over the book by people in Hong Kong, and had to change the name of Hong Kong into Tching-Yen, and the name of one of the characters from Lane (innocent enough, one would think) to Fane. I was wondering why this rather obscure novel by Maugham has received nothing but glowing five-star reviews by almost exclusively female readers. The reason is that this novel is about marriage and the restraints that marriage imposes upon passion. Also, it is a classic story of a woman's spiritual awakening.

With *The Painted Veil*, Maugham is at his most masterful. It's hard to conceive of the inspiration which led to his story line; it is brilliantly creative. Such a story line deserves masterful character development, and the reader is not disappointed. From the main protagonists to the bit players, we learn the strengths and weaknesses of each in economically structured vignettes. Character is also illuminated by Maugham's narrative, as when Kitty becomes aware just how terrifying her husband's jealousy could be: "It [his mind] was like a dark and ominous landscape seen by a flash of lighting and in a moment hidden again by the night. She shuddered at what she saw." Kitty's lover is employed by the British Government, and is second in charge in that colony. She learns that the Government "doesn't want clever men ; clever men have ideas, and ideas cause trouble; they want men who have charm and tact and who can be counted on never to make a blunder." Of course her lover, Charlie Townsend, does make a blunder, and it is precisely in becoming Kitty's lover. Then, in describing the differences between the French nuns and herself, she realizes: "They spoke a different language, not only of the tongue, but of the heart." Married to a man she realizes she hardly knows, she sees them as "two little drops in a river that flowed silently towards the unknown; two little drops that to themselves had so much individuality, and to the onlooker were but an indistinguishable part of the river." Of the separate, special motivations that each individual has, Maugham says, "Tao. Some of us look for the Way in opium and some in God, some of us in whiskey and some in love. It is all the same Way, and it leads nowhither." Maugham exposes two shortcomings in this novel.

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