

The Painted Veil: A Contextual Analysis

ASL ~ Literature in English



Introduction

- A veil: to cover something up
- From a sonnet by poet Percy Bysshe Shelley: “Lift not the painted veil which those who live call life.”
- Lifting of illusions and revealing truths

“We often fall in love with the illusions we have of about a person rather than who they really are. That is the ‘painted veil’ that is in front of our vision of the truth and when those illusions get torn away it can be process of disenchantment and pain.”

Edward Norton



Introduction

- Romantic tales set in 1920s China
- Cholera epidemic + civil uprising against British colonization (tensions running high)
- Forgoing sugar for pungent truths
- Steeped in the painful emotions of betrayal, resentment and the realities of marrying for the wrong reasons



Introduction

- A visually stunning and emotionally charged journey to the meat of the heart
- Love is not always gentle or syrupy, yet can bloom unexpectedly even when scorned and surrounded by death
- Exploring the devastating emotional consequences of infidelity, and the difficult, if not impossible, road to redemption and reconciliation



Characters

- Walter Fane
 - An English middle-class, lackluster bacteriologist
 - Lives and works in Shanghai
 - Quick proposal to Kitty Garstin
 - Compassionate and altruistic: risking his own health to care for the sick and dying



Characters

- Intelligent, with a cold passive-aggressive nature
 - Determined to punish his wife when learning of Kitty's affair
 - Giving her two choices:
 - Joining him on a treacherous journey to a remote, cholera-infested village where he has volunteered his expertise
 - Endure the disgrace and embarrassment of a public divorce (What does it tell about people's attitude towards marriage at that time?)
 - As revenge for his wife's unfaithfulness: Walter makes the journey to the village more arduous and unbearable than it needs to be



Characters

- Kitty Fane
 - A young, selfish, upper-class socialite
 - Irresponsible: accepting Walter's proposal, not for love, but to rebel against her mother
 - Immature and reckless: engages in a sordid affair with a married British diplomat named Charles Townsend



Characters

- Change: Shallowness subside + Compassionate for others (working in the orphanage)
- sees a side of her husband she has never known



Character Development

- Both Kitty and Walter's characters grow and evolve through self-discovery
- Kitty:
 - From a selfish, shallow young woman
 - To a mature and compassionate person
 - Accepting and suffering the consequences of her poor choices
 - Learns to love and respect her husband for whom she initially felt no emotions



Character Development

- Walter:
 - Grows as he sheds his cold exterior
 - Allows himself to forgive Kitty and see her in a new light
 - Acknowledgement:
 - When he married her he didn't really know her
 - He created qualities in her which he wished she had, and not ones she actually possessed
 - He was also to blame for marital problems
 - Dying plea for forgiveness: he feels guilty for bringing her to the disease-ridden village (a sign of growth in him)



Change in Relationships

- On a trip to London Walter meets and quickly proposes marriage to Kitty
- She irresponsibly accepts his marriage proposal, not for love, but to rebel against her mother
- Walter whirls her away to Shanghai and she quickly becomes bored
- The two realize they have little in common and nothing to talk about
- Kitty engages in a sordid affair with Charles Townsend



Change in Relationships

- Kitty reluctantly agrees to join Walter after Townsend refuses to leave his wife
- Revenge for his wife's unfaithfulness: Walter makes the journey to the village more arduous and unbearable
- Resentment between the two characters grows and festers like the diseases that surround them



Change in Relationships

- Walter and Kitty rarely speak
- Loathe one another
- Death wish upon each other
 - Kitty purposefully and rebelliously eats raw vegetables
 - After Walter warns against it due to possible contamination with the cholera-causing bacteria
 - She eats them to spite him
 - He follows suit to spite her



Change in Relationships

- Non-verbal communication between Walter and Kitty
 - He avoids conversations with her
 - If he must talk to her for the first half of the film: angry, short and irritated tones
 - He hardly looks at her, but rather at the floor or walls
 - Emphasizing his ill-feelings toward her and his hurt by her betrayal
 - They rarely smile



Change in Relationships

- Getting bored at home, Kitty visits a local orphanage
- Hoping for an occupation to curb her boredom
- Her character starts to widen and deepen
- Influenced by the nuns in the orphanage
- Both Kitty and Walter are on a personal journey of inner discovery



Change in Relationships

- Walter's vision of his wife: softens
- The more they learn about each other – their mutual respect grows and the anger and bitterness subsides
- A somber, sobering love: blooms amidst the death and turmoil surrounding them



Change in Relationships

- Kitty's pregnancy: after their emotional reconciliation
- Is the baby Walter's or Townsend's?
- A reminder of the initial betrayal (bringing them to the diseased-ridden village)
- Walter accepts her: moving forward past the betrayal



Change in Relationships

- Ending: not with a “happily ever after”
 - Walter succumbs to the gruesome cholera shortly after they learn of the pregnancy
 - He dies after asking Kitty to forgive him
 - London (5 years later): Kitty and her son bump into Townsend on the streets
 - Townsend: “someone of no importance”



Message

- Love and forgiveness are possible even after betrayal and revenge



Exercise

- Short essay
 - “It is never too late to love, if you recognize it.”
Discuss this statement with reference to Kitty and Walter in *The Painted Veil*.

