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Lifting the Veils in
William Somerset Maugham's
The Painted Veil

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Abstract

Novels with love as a theme often deal with a passionate or forbidden love. In 1925 William Somerset Maugham wrote a different version of the typical love story we have read so many times. It tells a story about a married couple who never really shares the same love for each other. Maugham mentions that he was inspired by Dante when he wrote *The Painted Veil*. Indeed, he uses different sources of inspirations, such as poems from Shelley and Goldsmith. The aim of this essay is to investigate what these intertextual references bring to the novel and what their functions are. The method I use is looking at the different references used by Maugham and stating their purpose and significance to the novel. The result of my investigation illustrates how the use of Shelley's theme of veiling signifies hiding, as well as not wanting to see the truth, while Goldsmith's poem shows the true relationship between the married couple and how corrupted society is. Maugham also lets Dante's Purgatorio demonstrate how Kitty, the wife, gets the chance to change her life for the better.

In 1925 William Somerset Maugham wrote *The Painted Veil*, a different version of the typical love story we have read so many times. It is unusual because it tells a story about a married couple who never really share the same love for each other. Maugham mentions that he was inspired by Dante when he wrote it (Preface 9). Indeed, Maugham uses different sources of inspiration: in addition to Dante, the novel's title comes from a poem by Shelley, that provides the important theme of veiling, and in a key event one of the protagonists quotes a line from Oliver Goldsmith's poem "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog", indicating the plot for the ending of the novel. In this essay I will investigate what the intertextual references bring to the novel, and what their functions are.

The Painted Veil tells about a woman named Kitty Garstin, who ends up marrying someone she barely knows for the wrong reasons, such as her desire to escape her family, combined with wanting to marry before her younger and less attractive sister. In Walter Fane she sees a man who truly loves her, and she realizes that he is someone she can take advantage of. However, she later becomes involved with another man, Charlie Townsend. When her husband, who is a bacteriologist, finds out about the affair she is punished in the most horrible way possible. Walter, who has up to this point given the impression of being a reticent coward, now volunteers to move to a remote town in China, Mei-Tan-Fu, which is suffering from a cholera epidemic. Kitty has no choice but to go with him, even though she knows that Walter's intention is for the cholera to kill her. The time she spends alone, while her husband is working as the only doctor in the town, provides her with time to reconsider her life.

We shall now look at the first of the intertextual references, some lines from Canto 6 of Dante's "Purgatorio". Thanks to these lines Maugham initially got the idea for *The Painted Veil*:

'Ah, when unto the world thou shalt have made

return, and rest from the way's long strain,'
the third after the second spirit said,
'me, who am Pia, may'st thou think of then:
'twas Siena made, Maremma that unmade me:
he knows it who with his own jewel, when
our mutual troth had first been plighted, wed me.' (Canto 6:25-31)

When reading the line “‘twas Siena made, Maremma that unmade me”, Maugham writes in his preface to the novel, he felt a desire to use the story as an inspiration, but re-write it and make a more modern version of it. It was the first time he started writing from a story instead of from a character. This section of the “Purgatorio” tells a tragic love story about a husband and his wife, Pia de’ Tolommei. The husband suspects that Pia is unfaithful and decides to kill her. He brings her to his castle in Maremma and hopes that its noxious fumes will kill her, but she takes too long to die so he throws her out of a window.

Maugham was inspired by the main plot of the “Purgatorio”. Both Walter and Pia’s husband want to kill their wives. They have both been deceived and therefore feel betrayed. And, they both choose an unusually discrete method to kill their wives. The husband in Dante’s story hopes that the tainted fumes will kill his wife Pia, while Walter’s intentions are that Kitty will be infected with cholera and thereafter die a painful death. In both texts, the husbands take their wives some place else to kill them: Pia’s husband takes her to Maremma, and Walter takes Kitty to Mei-Tan-Fu. Finally, both unhappily married women go through a moral development. Because Kitty survives, she begins to change when she starts to work with the nuns, taking care of the orphans. She starts to see that there is more to life than going to parties and having a great time, and loves the feeling of being needed. But it is not only thanks to the nuns she starts to change, it is also due to the presence of death. Because of the cholera, people are dying everywhere and this terrifies Kitty at first. But this is just the

beginning of the process she has to go through in order to be purified. She has to work hard to change her old habits and ways. Pia, on the other hand, begins her development when she is already dead and goes to Purgatorio. This is where she sees all the wrong she has done and begins her purification, Purgatorio being the place where people atone for their sins and change for the better. Both women realize the truth about who they are and what they have accomplished so far, and want to change for the better. Pia begins her change after she dies, while Kitty is able to develop while she is alive, because she is the one who survives.

This is to say that, in *The Painted Veil* Walter is the one who ends up dead instead, and not his wife. Before he dies dramatically of the cholera he quotes a line from a poem by Goldsmith, which provides part of the plot for the novel: “The dog it was that died.” This line is taken from Goldsmith’s “An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog”:

Good people all, of every sort,
Give ear unto my song; And if you find it wond’rous short,
It cannot hold you long.

In Isling town there was a man,
Of whom the world might say,
That still a godly race he ran,
Whene’er he went to pray.

A kind and gentle heart he had,
To comfort friends and foes;
The naked every day he clad,
When he put on his cloaths.

And in that town a dog was found,
As many dogs there be,
Both mongrel, puppy, whelp, and hound,
And curs of low degree.

This dog and man at first were friends;
But when a pique began,
The dog, to gain some private ends,
Went mad and bit the man.

Around from all the neighbouring streets,
The wondering neighbours ran,
And swore the dog had lost his wits,
To bit so good a man.

The wound it seem'd both sore and sad,
To every christian eye;
And while the swore the dog was mad,
They swore the man would die.

But soon a wonder came to light,
That shew'd the rogues they lied,
The man recovered of the bite,
The dog it was that dy'd. (Goldsmith 378)

The poem is about selfishness and how it is manifested in people's actions in society (Jalic). Its main message is a critique of society, telling a story about betrayal and shallowness. At the beginning of the poem one learns that the dog and the man are friends, but when the dog bites the man, people start to think that the dog has gone mad. They are all convinced that the man will die, and are shocked when it turns out to be the dog that unexpectedly dies instead.

In *The Painted Veil* it is Walter who is the dog and Kitty the man. The similarities between the "Elegy" and the novel are that Walter and Kitty, just like the man and the dog, start off being friends. After Kitty's betrayal, however, Walter takes her to the cholera-infected village and everyone thinks that he is insane to move with his wife to such a dangerous place. Their friend in Mei-Tan-Fu, Waddington, says to Kitty one day: "I've asked myself if you're both here to commit suicide" (Maugham 120). At the beginning of the novel Walter thinks that he is above everything and everybody, but after he finds out about Kitty's adultery he is so full of hatred and anger that revenge is all he can think about. However, it is not clear if he really is such a superior being. If he is, it would only be up to the point where he finds out about the affair. After that he is so consumed with the thought of revenge that he becomes just as bad as he believes everybody else to be. His way of killing his wife perhaps does not make him a murderer, since it is the disease that will kill her, but he is definitely not innocent either. His intentions were to kill her and that makes him guilty. His plan of revenge is even worse than Kitty's betrayal. She later figures out what his intentions are when she asks him about their future together and gets the answer, "Oh, don't you think we can let the future take care of itself?" (Maugham 183). After listening to her husband's comment, Kitty thinks to herself: "There was the weariness of death in his voice" (Maugham 183). Kitty asks him if he despises her, and he answers, "No. [...] I despise myself" (Maugham 142) for having allowed himself to love her. Despising himself for acting like a fool, he wants to see her suffer. Unfortunately for him, his evil plan does not work and he is the one who dies instead

of his wife, just like the dog in the poem who dies because the man was more poisonous than the dog-bite. Both Walter and the dog want to take the life of Kitty and the man, but they both fail and die themselves.

The social criticism of the poem is felt in the novel too. At the beginning of the novel society is described in unflattering colours, and Kitty is a prime example of what is wrong. There are a great number of dinner parties and balls, and Kitty attends as many as possible. Along with many other people she lives a spoiled life and has no worries. At the same time Kitty's mother tries to get her two daughters married to wealthy and successful men. Their personalities are not important, only their status and connections. There seems to be a lack of emotion and thoughtfulness, and the only thing left is a great deal of shallowness and selfishness, just like in the "Elegy". The way that the Garstin women treat their father is another example of that. The mother and the two daughters take advantage of this old man. They take his money to buy clothes and shoes, but do not so much as thank him or pay attention to his presence. Another excellent example of the selfishness in society is Dorothy, wife of Charlie Townsend, Kitty's lover:

And she [Dorothy] was what Kitty's mother called a gentlewoman. But Kitty did not like her. She did not like her casual manner; and the politeness with which she treated you when you went there, to tea or dinner, was exasperating because you could not but feel how little interest she took in you. [...] Her face was a mask. She smiled and in her pleasant, well-mannered way said the things that were expected of her; but for all her cordiality held you at a distant. (Maugham 17)

Like so many other characters in the novel, Dorothy surrounds herself with people who have good social connections and who arrange wonderful parties. However, underneath it all, there is emptiness. They do not know each other and they do not like each other. The clearest

example of society's corruption is Kitty's betrayal. She is the one who, along with Charlie, betrays their loved ones. Walter sees all this. The dog can therefore be seen as a symbol of the sensibility and decency in society (Jalic), just like Walter. He is the one who exposes the corruption and the selfishness not only in Kitty, but in the entire society, becoming a victim just like the dog, who dies because of other people's selfishness.

A related question is the nature of Walter's death. It could have been an accident, or he could have infected himself. In the latter case he is committing suicide, although that is something one never really finds out. Waddington seems to believe he did, and even Kitty is terrified when she finds out that it could be a possibility (Maugham 217). This possibility makes the use of Goldsmith's poem in the novel more complex. The dog in the poem bites the man because the man, representing society, is corrupt, yet it dies because after biting the man it has that poison in its blood. That could be what happened to Walter. Kitty hurt him so badly, first with having an affair and later being pregnant with Charlie's child, that he just could not bear it. This is stated by Kitty when she tells Waddington that Walter died of a broken heart (Maugham 217). If Walter really did intentionally infect himself with the cholera, that could be because he did not believe he could change his situation, and therefore gave up.

If Maugham received a strong initial idea from Dante, and parts of the plot from Goldsmith, he took the title and the theme of the novel from a poem by Shelley. On the first page of the novel the following line is printed: "...the painted veil which those who live call life." This quote is from a sonnet by Shelley:

Lift not the painted veil which those who live
Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,
And it but mimic all we would believe
With colours idly spread, -behind, lurk Fear

And Hope, twin Destinies; who ever weave
Their shadows, o'er the chasm, sightless and drear.

I knew one who had lifted it – he sought,
For his lost heart was tender, things to love,
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
The world contains, the which he could approve.

Through the unheeding many he did move,
A splendour among shadows, a bright blot
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove

For truth, and like the Preacher found it not (Shelley 608)

There is also a similar line in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: "Death is the veil which those who live call life." That Maugham takes the title of his novel from Shelley's sonnet shows that he must have had a purpose in using it. By definition a veil hides something, and in this case it prevents one from seeing the reality of life clearly, or seeing things you do not want to see. In this novel it means hiding reality and truth, and even death. Life is made out of illusions; even people's ideas of death are an illusion, and that is why death, as well as life, is covered by a veil (Lundberg). In the novel we have, for example, Kitty who agrees to marry someone she barely knows and then looks away from the fact that it is making her miserable. She tells Walter so: "It was a mistake that I ever married you, I never should have done it, I was a fool. I never cared for you" (Maugham 72). Walter on the other hand marries someone he loves passionately even though he knows his love is not returned. He is ready to be humiliated as long as she lets him love her once in a while. When he finally confronts Kitty, he says to her "I'm afraid you've thought me a bigger fool than I am" (Maugham 71). Walter lifts the veil, but instead of finding the truth and seeing what is real, he finds death (Sandeep).

Another example of someone who uses a veil to hide something is Charlie Townsend's wife Dorothy. She knows about her husband's flirts and love affairs, but chooses to look the other way. She knows that he will never get serious with any of the women, so therefore there is no real harm. She allows him to have "innocent" affairs because she does not see the women as a threat. When Kitty asks Waddington if Dorothy takes Charlie's flirtations seriously, he answers:

Oh, no, she knows they don't go very far. She says she'd like to be able to make friends of the poor little things who fall to Charlie; but they're always so common. She says it's really not flattering to her that women who fall in love with her husband are so uncommonly second-rate. (Maugham 111)

Dorothy is the person who makes Charlie successful and that is why he does not want to leave her, because without her he feels he is nothing. Charlie is truly fond of Dorothy and knows how lucky he is to have her. But when Kitty asks him why he does not think she deserves his loyalty and faithfulness, he answers, "What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for" (Maugham 243).

If one looks at the second half of the novel, one discovers the presence of death everywhere. As mentioned above, Shelley wrote that the veil hides a number of things. He also said that the veil can mean death. There are a great many people in the novel dying of the cholera: nuns, doctors and ordinary townspeople. Waddington tells Kitty, "They're dying like flies" (Maugham 101), and later adds that the death toll is about a hundred a day. Added to this is the death of Walter, followed by the death of Kitty's mother. Waddington speaks to Kitty about life after death on one occasion, telling her that the nuns believe that it is a much better state. Waddington himself questions the belief: what if there is no life after death? What if the nuns have given up everything in hope of a paradise, and it turns out to be false? If everything ends with death, then the nuns have been cheated. Continuing, he gets into the

concept of illusions, and life being made out of one. He has an idea that the only reason why people can look at the world without disgust is because of the beauty they create to deal with the chaos. That is why there is music, books and paintings to enjoy, because without art there would be only tragedy and misery (Maugham 214). These ideas seem inspired by Shelley. He said that poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty in the world and allow us to enjoy objects as if we have never seen them before (Elam).

At a wedding, a veil is usually white, representing the innocence of the person wearing it. White is pure and has not yet been violated. In the novel the veil is *painted*, which means that it is not an innocent veil the characters are wearing. Maugham used this concept to show how all of society and the people living in it are tainted. The only characters' in the novel that wear white, literally speaking, are the nuns. In the novel one can read how they are all dressed completely in white, except for a red cross on their chests. It is not completely clear if the nuns are in fact wearing painted veils like the rest of the characters. Nuns are supposed to be innocent and saint-like, but maybe Maugham wants to say that just because they are working for God does not mean that they are innocent. Indeed Waddington questions their true nature. He says that he tried to make them leave, for their own safety, but they would not, because they all want to die as martyrs (Maugham 101). Another thing that can make one question the nuns' motives would be their imposing Catholicism on the townspeople and the orphans. Do they only help and take care of the children as long as they can spread their religion? However, another interpretation is also possible. Kitty believes that they are all saints, and they are the reason why she decides to make a change in her life and give some back. The nuns do help Kitty lift her own veil. They are the reason why she sees the truth about her own shallow and selfish lifestyle. When she meets the nuns she sees all the good they do and wants to do the same. The nuns' functions in the novel therefore are to be the turning point in Kitty's

life. That means that they do good after all. Their veils are white because their good deeds make Kitty change for the better.

But with the possible exception of the nuns, the veils for the characters in the novel are not the white of purity, but are painted, which means that no one is in fact innocent. Most of the characters have their veils lifted at the end, thus finding out about a reality that has earlier been hidden. Kitty lifts her veil, and realizing the empty life she has been living, she also feels guilty. In addition to mistreating Walter, she realizes the way she has been treating her father. When she returns home to England after Walter's death, she apologises and tries to make amends:

Kitty knew too well that she had done nothing to beget her father's affection, he had never counted in the house and had been taken for granted, the bread-winner who was a little despised because he could provide no more luxuriously for his family; but she had taken for granted that he loved her just because he was her father, and it was a shock to discover that his heart was empty of feeling for her. (Maugham 264)

Another example of Kitty having her veil lifted is when she sees the truth about who Charlie really is, discovering for example that he manipulates people by telling them what he thinks they would like to hear. But she also sees the amazing life she can have if she makes some changes, both for herself and her unborn child.

To conclude, Maugham used three different writers and their works as subtexts in his novel *The Painted Veil*. As an inspiration for the main outline of the story he used Dante's "Purgatorio", which tells a story about a husband wanting to have an unfaithful wife killed off. For the twist with the ending, the husband dying rather than the wife, he uses the plot from Oliver Goldsmith's "Elegy". For the title of the novel, as well as its general theme of hiding and revealing the truth, Maugham uses Shelley's sonnet about the veil. *The Painted*

Veil describes people living their lives wearing a painted veil. They cannot see what is real, only life's and death's illusions. All the characters are wearing painted veils and not the usual white ones, standing for innocence and purity. That would mean that the people in the novel are not innocent, which take us back to Goldsmith's "Elegy" about the corruption and selfishness among people. On his deathbed when Walter is the one dying of the cholera instead of Kitty, as he first intended, he realizes that what he once thought was life is not really true. One might at first mistake Walter for a fool, marrying someone who does not love him, but at the end the reader comes to realize the enormous strength of Walter's character. Kitty enters the marriage to escape her family and in Walter she sees a man she does not love but can manipulate and use. Losing the veil for her means going from being spoiled, shallow and vain to becoming more human. She has an epiphany at the end and she realizes the empty life she has been living; seeing the truth about life she is able to continue it. In the second half of the novel death can be found everywhere. People are dying of cholera, and later on Walter dies and so does Kitty's mother. The dead bring us back to Dante's "Purgatorio", with its dead souls, and makes us see that the cholera-infected village, Mei-Tan-Fu, has become Kitty's Purgatorio. It is there she does penance until her veil is lifted, with some help from the nuns, and she becomes a woman who sees more clearly how to do good in society as well for herself.

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