

The Painted Veil Study Guide

The Painted Veil by W. Somerset Maugham

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Painted Veil Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Preface through Chapter 5.....	4
Chapters 6 through 13.....	6
Chapters 14 through 21.....	8
Chapters 22 through 27.....	10
Chapters 28 through 39.....	12
Chapters 40 through 48.....	14
Chapters 49 through 57.....	16
Chapters 58 through 69.....	18
Chapters 70 through 80.....	21
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	35



Plot Summary

After basically ruining her marriage with an affair, Kitty accompanies her husband, Walter, to Mei-tan-fu, a Chinese province afflicted with a cholera epidemic. There, amid death and misery, Kitty sees in a convent of French nuns great examples of self-sacrifice and the kind of happiness she had always wanted.

Kitty, an Englishwoman, had been pressured from a young age to marry well by her mother, who tried to overcome her own sense of failure through her daughters. Kitty shared these social ambitions but could never find the right mate. Out of desperation, she married Walter Fane, a scientist, and returned with him to Hong Kong where he conducted his work. Kitty was never happy in her marriage, and thus she finds herself in an adulterous affair with Charlie Townsend, a man of some influence and status in Hong Kong. When Walter finds out, he asks Kitty to either come with him to Mei-tan-fu or he will sue her for adultery. Kitty, blinded by love, thinks Charlie, who is also married, will leave his wife for her and they will live happily together. Charlie, however, has no such intention. It is too impractical for a man with his career he tells her. Heart-broken and without any other option, she travels with Walter to Mei-tan-fu, suspicious that his intention is for her to catch cholera and die.

When they arrive there, the tension between Kitty and Walter persists. Waddington, a local customs official, becomes a kind of counselor to Kitty, helping her out with keen insight and observations. He introduces her to the French nuns who are working with the poor in the area and taking care of the many orphans. So impressed by their spirit of self-sacrifice, Kitty begins working for them and helping out around the convent. One day while at work, she discovers she is pregnant, though she does not know who the father is. Despite her many attempts to rectify the situation with her husband, his cold demeanor does not lighten, and Kitty is awakens one night to the news that he has come down with cholera. Kitty and Waddington barely make it to him before he dies, and he is hardly conscious at all.

Kitty remains about a week after his death and burial before heading back to Hong Kong briefly before sailing to England to return to her family. Her hope of not seeing Charlie Townsend is dashed when she is met by his wife, Dorothy, who insists that she stay with them while she is in Hong Kong. Still bitter and angry towards Charlie after the way he treated her, she tries to keep her distance, but winds up faltering and yielding to his advances. Kitty becomes disgusted with herself; she thought she was a changed woman and is ashamed at how easily she fell back into her old ways. She leaves two days later.

Kitty's mother dies shortly before she returns. Her father, however, is apparently not very distraught by it. Kitty realizes that the family has largely taken the father for granted, as an unloved source of income. He has received and accepted a commission as a judge in the Bahamas and looks at it as an escape. Reflecting on the spirit of sacrifice in the nuns, which made them so happy, Kitty asks her father if she can come with him, resolving to do everything in her power to make him feel loved and happy.



Preface through Chapter 5

Preface through Chapter 5 Summary

Preface: The inspiration for this story was a line from Dante's *Purgatorio* which was interpreted for the author by a young with whom he was staying in Florence. She tells the story of a woman who committed adultery and was taken to a castle filled with noxious vapors he had hoped would kill her. When she survived for a good while, he threw her out the window and killed her.

Chapter 1: Kitty and Charlie are in the midst of an adulterous rendezvous at her home in Hong Kong. This was a common occurrence for them, but Charlie had decided to come over at an abnormal time. Kitty is scared because someone tried to open the door to the bedroom they are in and fears it is her husband, but Charlie reassures her that it is one of the Chinese servants.

Chapter 2: Charlie and Kitty move to the sitting room. Kitty is still nervous, but she is reassured by Charles, whom she loves very much. Even if it was her husband, she says, it was worth it. Charlie leaves for work.

Chapter 3: Watching Charlie leave, Kitty reflects on their situation. She thinks it was stupid for them to meet like they had—during the day at her home, but she still thinks it is worth it. Normally they would meet at the house of a Chinese curio dealer; she did not like the house, but she did not really care because she was with Charlie. Charlie is married, too, and she despises his wife, whom she describes as a dreadful, superficial woman.

Chapter 4: Kitty is unhappy with her social situation in Hong Kong, which is largely determined by the occupation of her husband. Her husband, Walter, is a Government bacteriologist, and when she married him, she did not realize how little prestige that carried.

Chapter 5: Kitty is still wondering who was trying the door earlier when she finds that her husband had apparently stopped by recently and dropped off a book for her. Her fears are confirmed. She calls Charlie to ask what to do, but he is busy and cannot talk. She reassures herself, thinking she does not care even if Walter finds out.

Preface through Chapter 5 Analysis

These chapters are characterized by what one might think are the typical ups and downs of a person in the midst of an adulterous relationship. Kitty is horrified at the sight of the moving door knob, fearful that her husband might discover her infidelity. Every scenario runs through her head and she is desperate to reassure herself that it could not possibly be Walter. She attempts to counterbalance these fears by the joy she receives from her relationship with Charlie, but one gets the sense that this is at least in



part a kind of psychological defensive mechanism. When her fears that it was Walter who tried the door are confirmed—though he still does not know that Charlie was there, necessarily—she boldly asserts that she does not care and would happily tell him, if necessary, what is happening. She is confident—perhaps overconfident—that everything will fall into place if her marriage with Walter ends.



Chapters 6 through 13

Chapters 6 through 13 Summary

Chapter 6: Soon after her marriage, Kitty knew she had made a mistake but blamed her mother for pressuring her. Her father is a lawyer—a King's Counsel—and a very slight, timid man. Her mother is overbearing and critical.

Chapter 7: Kitty is not at all fond of her mother, Mrs. Garstin. She had married Kitty's father in the hopes that he would turn out to be a prestigious, rich man, but those hopes never panned out, and he wound up with a modest legal practice. He was a very timid man, and she had no difficulty controlling him. Kitty's mother was driven by social ambition and frugality. She would frequently throw dinner parties for her many acquaintances and prided herself on how cheaply she could do so.

Chapter 8: Even though Kitty's mother felt the situation with her husband had become hopeless, she still entertained great hopes that her two daughters, Kitty and Doris, would marry well. She had particularly great expectations for Kitty, who was by far the prettiest of the two. Growing up, Kitty inherited her mother's values and dreamed of marrying a man of great social and economic status. She had many suitors and many marriage proposals but never found the right match; none of the young men who had taken interest in her had the kind of potential for which she was searching. Her mother became anxious and displeased with Kitty's failure to find a husband, and the dissatisfaction only grew when Kitty's younger sister daughter becomes engaged. Desperate, Kitty married Walter Fane.

Chapter 9: Walter was a vague acquaintance to Kitty, a young man she had met at social gatherings but never really got to know. Observing the interest Walter was taking in her daughter, Mrs. Garstin prodded Kitty about it. To her disappointment, however, Kitty said she was not interested in marrying him and did not think he was interested in her.

Chapter 10: Over the course of the summer, the two continued to see each other, and the initially-shy Walter opened up somewhat. Still, however, there seemed to be no real romance between them. She found out he was a bacteriologist who normally lived and worked in Hong Kong, and Kitty was intrigued by the lifestyle. When the announcement came that Doris was going to marry, Kitty became desperate.

Chapter 11: To her surprise, Walter proposed to her one day when they stumbled upon one another in a park. She was taken aback because she had never thought of him in that way and did not think he was in love with her. Marrying Walter would be convenient for her, since they would be wed and leave the country before Doris' wedding. Kitty agreed.



Chapter 12: When they were wed, Kitty still did not know him very well and gradually found him to be a very timid, self-conscious man, who lived a very modest and reserved social life in Hong Kong, much to Kitty's displeasure. He loved Kitty very much, though, and tended to her every need.

Chapter 13: Life with Walter grew increasingly dull, and she quickly tired of his conservative demeanor. Kitty began to wonder why Walter ever thought they made a good match.

Chapters 6 through 13 Analysis

These chapters give the background for Kitty's current situation. She is clearly very resentful of her mother, whose pressure, motivated by vanity, led Kitty to marry Walter. It is obvious that Kitty and Walter are not a good match—Kitty is outgoing and talkative while Walter is a shy introvert—but one must wonder how much of Kitty's dissatisfaction is caused by her relationship with Charlie. Kitty recalls becoming bored with Walter before Charlie is in the picture, but any notion of love or compatibility is totally absent in her decision to marry Walter or really to find a mate at all. She had few illusions about Walter when she accepted his proposal—perhaps she thought he might be a bit more interesting once she knew him better, but it is unlikely she had very high hopes. It is reasonable to think that her analysis of her past is largely colored by her present situation, and this interpretation is validated by the fact that the author includes Kitty's reflection on her past after introducing her affair with Charlie.



Chapters 14 through 21

Chapters 14 through 21 Summary

Chapter 14: Kitty met Charlie Townsend at a social function through her husband, and the two immediately had a connection. Conversation came easily, unlike her present situation with Walter, and she immediately knew she had made a good impression on him.

Chapter 15: After their first encounter, the relationship between Kitty and Charlie developed quickly. He provided such a contrast with her husband that she fell in love with him very quickly. She hesitated before having sex with him, not because she lacked the desire, but because her upbringing made her look poorly on a woman who did such a thing. Afterward, however, she was so content that she did not care.

Chapter 16: Charlie and Kitty, of necessity, conduct their relationship with the utmost secrecy, more for her sake than for his, he says. Kitty grew more and more in love as time progressed and dreamed of being Charlie's wife.

Chapter 17: Kitty still does not know what Walter knows, but her impatience to be with Charlie almost makes her want Walter to know and have their marriage come to an end. She is sure Charlie would leave his wife for her, but there is still an undertone of anxiety in her mind. Her pondering is interrupted by the sound of Walter arriving.

Chapter 18: Kitty is terrified to see Walter for the first time since the rendezvous with Charlie. His demeanor unsettles her even more: He is not obviously angry, but he is strangely cordial and calm. Something is clearly wrong, but he says nothing to her yet.

Chapter 19: Convinced Walter knows, Kitty calls Charlie and asks to meet him, not mentioning over the phone what it is about. They agree to meet at the curio shop.

Chapter 20: Kitty arrives at the curio shop and waits for Charlie. When he arrives, she tells him that Walter knows, although he has not yet said anything. Charlie is gladdened by the fact that Walter has been silent so far, and speculates that he may avoid exposing the situation for the sake of his career. This annoys Kitty; if Walter is going to stay with her, it would be because he loves her, not simply ambition. Kitty is too charmed by Charlie to let this bother her, though, and the two make love.

Chapter 21: That evening, Kitty goes with Walter to a dinner with some acquaintances. Walter continues with his calm, inexpressive demeanor, hardly making eye contact with her. He still says nothing, and Kitty begins to think that perhaps Charlie's explanation about his motives is correct.



Chapters 14 through 21 Analysis

These chapters shed more light on the nature of the infatuation between Kitty and Charlie. Kitty loves everything about Charlie: He is good looking, smart, powerful, and charming. He is everything she wants, or thinks she wants, in a mate. What exactly Charlie likes about Kitty is less clear, and somewhat obscured by his charm. Obviously, there is physical attraction; this tension is there from the first words he speaks to her at the dinner party. He is quite a bit older than she—he says in a few years he'll be fat and old—with a successful career.

It is also starting to become evident that the two have slightly different ideas about where the relationship is headed. Kitty unquestionably wants to be Charlie's wife; it's her constant fantasy. Perhaps sensing some reluctance on Charlie's part, however, she is reluctant to directly say this. She is clearly vexed when Charlie is obviously pleased by the fact that Walter, who evidently knows of the affair, has not yet said anything to her. She thought that perhaps his finding out about them, as unpleasant as it might be, could be a catalyst for something new. Charlie, on the other hand, seems eager to keep things as they are. In a word, Kitty is romantic, perhaps even unrealistically so, while Charlie is decidedly pragmatic. These dispositions can be seen clearly in how each understands Walter's action. The practical Charlie explains Walter's silence and possible decision to stay with Kitty purely in terms of money and career. Imputing such a motive to Walter did not even cross Kitty's mind: Walter is madly in love with her, and that is why he will not let an affair ruin the marriage.



Chapters 22 through 27

Chapters 22 through 27 Summary

Chapter 22: Walter comes home from work early to talk to Kitty the next day. He tells her he is going to a Chinese province named Mei-tan-fu which is suffering from a cholera epidemic. At first she thinks he is planning to kill himself, but then he tells her he expects her to come and she wonders if he plans on killing her. When she refuses, citing the danger, he tells her he is planning to file a petition accusing her of adultery.

Chapter 23: Kitty breaks down in tears at this accusation but does not deny it. Walter remains calm which causes Kitty to become angry, and she denounces him, telling him that she never loved him. He knows this, though, and says he was content simply being with her and loving her. He is also doubtful that Charlie will really leave his wife for her like she thinks, but offers her a deal: If Charlie leaves his wife and agrees to marry Kitty, he will let her divorce her, thus avoiding a public scandal.

Chapter 24: Kitty arrives at Charlie's work, desperate to talk to him. She tells him what happened with Walter, expecting him to be ready to leave his wife and marry her. As Walter predicted, however, he is not so eager and avoids immediately jumping on the opportunity.

Chapter 25: Charlie ends Kitty's fantasy by telling her that he has no intention of leaving his wife. It would spell the end of his promising career, and he cannot sacrifice that. Kitty is crushed; evidently, Charlie does not feel the same way about her as she does him.

Chapter 26: Charlie urges Kitty to take her husband's offer and go with him to Mei-tan-fu. Kitty, really, has no other option. Charlie will not have her and she cannot live on her own. Kitty decides that he is right, but she now feels like a fool for misjudging his intentions with her, and realizes that the reason Walter offered the divorce deal to her was to show her the true character of Charlie.

Chapter 27: Kitty tells Walter she will come with him. Walter, still showing no emotion, coolly acknowledges it and tells her to be ready for the next day.

Chapters 22 through 27 Analysis

Thus far in the story, Walter has been portrayed—indirectly in Kitty's description, for the most part—as somewhat of an unassuming fool. However, he shows quite a bit of savvy in how he deals with Kitty's adultery, even if his intentions are unclear. Kitty's fears that he is trying to murder her certainly seem far-fetched, but at the same time, it is not obvious why he does want her to come. He says at first that she would come to comfort him and help him, but he hardly wants to look at her. On the other hand, such an outlandish fear might be expected to come out of the whirl of emotions in which Kitty is

engulfed. The reader is probably supposed to feel in the same position as Kitty: muddled and suspicious.

These chapters also make clear what the reader ought to have expected, that Kitty has been blinded to Charlie's real intentions, and probably also been manipulated by an experienced adulterer. Even in her very emotional breakdown before him, Charlie shows no real remorse, and it is obvious he is not the least bit tempted to give up his wife to marry her. She has been nothing more than a plaything for him all along.



Chapters 28 through 39

Chapters 28 through 39 Summary

Chapter 28: Kitty and Walter set out on their trip to Mei-tan-fu. Kitty's mind is absorbed with pain over Charlie, but she does her best to hide her tears. Walter remains aloof, barely talking to her. She decides that if it is Walter's intention to kill her, she does not care.

Chapter 29: The trip continues and Kitty's mind continues to turn. She thought that by now Walter would have forgiven her, that her power over him was stronger than this. As of yet, she has not succumbed, and she begins to think that maybe his intentions really are evil.

Chapter 30: As they pass through the final stretch of their journey, the caravan passes through a graveyard. Kitty is gripped with terror to see some Chinese peasants carrying a coffin.

Chapter 31: Kitty and Walter arrive at their new residence and she meets Waddington, an English official who is also helping out in the area. He had come with food in hopes of dining with them.

Chapter 32: The three dine together and get to know each other. Waddington is a friendly man, if a little eccentric, who clearly is fond of drinking. Townsend's name comes up in the course of conversation, as Waddington is curious about his political future in Hong Kong, but Walter carries on nonchalantly.

Chapter 33: That night, Kitty is tortured by dreams. She finds herself alone and afraid, only to be rescued by Charlie. The comfort is only temporary though, as they are separated by a group of peasants carrying a coffin. Kitty wakes up filled with terror and looks out the window of the bungalow at dawn. She sees the town, girded about by the city wall, and mistakes it for a beautiful fortress which impresses her so much she cries.

Chapter 34: Walter is very busy tending to the crisis in the town—about a hundred people die each day, Kitty hears. Kitty spends most of her time alone reflecting on her life and situation. She is so uncomfortable with Walter and scared of the epidemic that she wants to leave, but she has nowhere to go.

Chapter 35: Waddington visits Kitty and she asks him about Charlie Townsend, since he evidently is familiar with him. Waddington's view of him is pretty dim: He is a stupid, conniving, ambitious politician who only cares about himself. He knows Charlie keeps some girls on the side, but never lets it develop into anything serious. Mrs. Townsend even knows about it and is disappointed that Charlie chooses such "second-rate" girls.

Chapter 36: Kitty is unsurprisingly crushed, once again, by learning this. Waddington confirmed everything she had come to suspect about Charlie.



Chapter 37: Waddington's visits to their bungalow become a regular occurrence. He teaches Kitty a lot about China and makes her appreciate the country and its history more. One night at dinner Waddington notices that Kitty and Charlie are having salads and tells them that the lettuce carries a great risk of cholera. They seem unconcerned, however, and continue eating anyway.

Chapter 38: The next day, Waddington shows up while Walter is away and asks Kitty to go on a walk with him. He asks her why she is there and does not believe her when she says it to support her husband. The rift between them is obvious. Indeed, he is not even sure why he himself is there. He is a hard worker, but does not seem particularly concerned with the plight of the Chinese nor is his interest scientific. He ponders aloud whether they both came to commit suicide. On the walk, they see a dead body of a beggar, and Waddington remarks that not long ago that beggar was a little boy running around with a kite. The idea is so sad that Kitty breaks down in tears.

Chapter 39: A few days later, Waddington tells Kitty that French nuns ministering to the sick in the area have invited her to visit the convent and Kitty agrees to go.

Chapters 28 through 39 Analysis

Kitty's suspicions about Walter's intentions are aggravated by his continued strange behavior. One might have thought that the invitation to join him on his mission was an invitation for her to show her love for him, but, given how he is acting towards her, it seems more like a punishment. While Kitty's fears might have been moderated to some extent by the fact that she was in an emotional, irrational state, even Waddington, an outside observer, has noted Walter's strange behavior and wondered why he came to the region. The constant reminders of death that surround them are surely no help.

Waddington proves to be a keen observer when it comes to Charlie, too. Though he does not know him very well, he knows enough to judge him to be a selfish, manipulative man who will do what he wants. Evidently, his reputation of womanizing is somewhat well-known; there is no reason to think that Waddington has some inside information. Perhaps Walter's confidence that Charlie would not leave his wife for Kitty was based on these rumors. Also noteworthy in this exchange is the fact that Kitty sought out Waddington's opinion on Charlie. With Walter acting bizarrely, Waddington is emerging as her only support in the new strange land.



Chapters 40 through 48

Chapters 40 through 48 Summary

Chapter 40: Kitty and Waddington travel to the convent. Passing through the city, Kitty notices that the poor pay less attention to them than usual; they are too preoccupied with the death that is mounting around them. Kitty meets Sister St. Joseph, a friendly and charming nun who speaks no English.

Chapter 41: The Mother Superior of the convent joins them. Kitty is instantly impressed by her, not only because of her obvious love for the poor and her saintly patience, but because of some quality Kitty could not pinpoint that is deep in Mother Superior's soul.

Chapter 42: The nuns take Kitty on a tour of the convent, showing her the orphans they house, whom they occupy with sewing. Kitty hears loud cries coming from the infirmary, but the nuns do not allow her to see the sick inside.

Chapter 43: The nuns next show her their chapel. It is very crude and even ugly, but the nuns are very proud of it. Four children have been abandoned by their parents, and Kitty is impressed by the love with which Mother Superior looks at them. It is common for the locals to abandon their children, especially girls, because they cannot afford them, or simply do not want to take care of them. Before Kitty leaves, the nuns tell her that Walter has been a great help to the convent and they are very thankful for his presence.

Chapter 44: Once home, Kitty's mind turns to thoughts of the convent. Something about the nuns had thoroughly impressed her, and the convent seemed to be a kind of alternate, spiritual world. She also remembers the kind words they had spoken of Walter, and she feels a bit of pride that they think well of him, despite their present difficulties. She feels stupid for loving Charlie and stupid for hating Walter. She speculates that the only reason she hated Walter was because he loved her so much.

Chapter 45: The personality of the nuns impresses Kitty the most. They are so kind, patient, and self-sacrificing; it is admirable to remain cheerful and dedicated amidst so much misery. However, beyond those great qualities, she senses something deeper which separated her from them, but she did not know what it was.

Chapter 46: That evening, after Walter has returned, Kitty asks what they are going to do after his work there is done. He does not know. She does not ask for forgiveness but wishes that they could be friends, at least. Seeing the nuns and their sacrifice made her and Walter's situation seem so trivial to her; they witnessed hundreds of deaths and even the deaths of close friends: it seemed silly, to Kitty, to let infidelity make them so miserable. Walter, as usual, is unresponsive, and so Kitty wonders aloud if the nuns will allow her to work with them. She then asks Walter if he despises her, and he says he does not; he despises himself.



Chapter 47: His words linger in Kitty's mind after dinner and finally she gathers the courage to ask what he meant. He says that he despises himself for loving her. In her defense, she says that he should not have expected much more from her, since she is just acting like all girls with her upbringing do. He merely replies that he does not blame her. She feels annoyed with him, that what now seems so trivial to her in light of what she saw at the convent, continues to weigh him down so much.

Chapter 48: Kitty's mind is still stuck on the convent, and the next day she returns to it to ask Mother Superior if she can help, since she knows that the nuns are short-handed. Mother has been crying; one of the sisters with whom she founded the convent, who had also come from France, had succumbed to cholera. Mother is at first reluctant to let Kitty help but eventually agrees.

Chapters 40 through 48 Analysis

On a chance visit to the convent, Kitty discovers there is something she is lacking in her life, but she is not sure what it is. All she knows is that the nuns have it and she does not. The nuns defy her expectations of religion, perhaps belying her religious sensibilities as an Englishwoman. Her stereotype of a nun was a grave, unhappy woman who spent all day praying and waiting to die. The French nuns, however, could not be more different. They are filled with joy and even child-like in many ways. This joy is made all the more impressive by the circumstances in which it occurs in that they are staring death in its face everyday. Nor are all of the deaths of anonymous Chinese; when Kitty goes to ask Mother Superior if she can work, one of the founding members of the convent had just succumbed to cholera.

If the difference between the nuns and Kitty's preconceptions is striking, so, too, is the difference between the nuns and Kitty. Kitty has a difficult time finding much of value in the local Chinese—a prejudice already hinted at in her conversations with Waddington—a racist vestige, perhaps, of being a citizen of a colonial superpower like England. The nuns, however, love the orphans they receive even more than the children's own parents, and go to great lengths to take care of them, even if it means much self-sacrifice. The nuns are also happy in a way Kitty has never been. All her life Kitty has sought happiness in social status and men, and, in various ways, it has always failed. Before she visits the convent, she has nearly hit the bottom and hardly cares if she lives or dies. The nuns have chosen to give up all the trappings of Western culture. The fact that they are happy perplexes her.



Chapters 49 through 57

Chapters 49 through 57 Summary

Chapter 49: Kitty begins work at the convent helping the younger orphans learn to sew. At first, her prejudicial distaste for the children is strong, but with time, it begins to fade. One child, though, is so severely deformed that Kitty can hardly look at her; the nuns, though, treat her with the greatest love.

Chapter 50: Kitty begins to develop a friendship with one of the nuns, Sister St. Joseph. She had grown up on a farm in France, very poor, and left it to establish the convent in China; she is resigned to the fact she would never see her family again, though it made her sad.

Chapter 51: The nuns had come to China with nothing and built the convent themselves using local labor. They lived very poorly and often had to resort to prayers—which were always answered—to extract themselves from desperate situations. Sister St. Joseph gossips a bit about Waddington. The nuns are not fond of his morals. Apparently he has been living with a Manchu woman, though he has never told Kitty of this.

Chapter 52: Kitty feels like she is getting larger but does not know why and has little time to think about it with all the work she does. One day she realizes that she has not thought of Charlie in a week and rejoices in the fact that she has gotten over him. In her joy, she plays with some children and runs around with them. Mother Superior, who to Kitty has taken on the air of a school principal, finds them, and Kitty is initially embarrassed. Mother Superior, though, is very warm and says that Kitty is so beautiful that it is no wonder the children are so happy around her.

Chapter 53: One day Kitty and Waddington take a trip to a Buddhist monastery, and Kitty is shocked by how dead everything seems. The monks seem bored, the statues of the gods are covered in dust, and there is a general lack of activity.

Chapter 54: Kitty questions Waddington about his future plans. After he finishes his work, he plans on retiring in China. Kitty mentions his Manchu woman, and Waddington reluctantly admits that it is true, but he has kept it a secret for the sake of his career. Kitty asks to meet her, and Waddington—again, reluctantly—agrees to arrange a time for Kitty to come to their house.

Chapter 55: While working at the convent, Kitty becomes sick, throws up, and passes out. When she comes to, she is sure she has cholera, but Mother Superior tells her she is pregnant. Kitty is shocked and returns home, taking the rest of the day off.

Chapter 56: Walter comes home early, having heard that Kitty had fallen ill, but he is not yet aware she is pregnant. Walter asks what is wrong, and Kitty tells him she is pregnant. There is a long pause and Walter asks if it is his child. Kitty is tempted to lie and say it is, but something in her forces her to tell the truth, and she says she does not



know. Walter gives an awkward chuckle and says that he must be off to work more and will not be back until very late.

Chapter 57: When Walter returns, Kitty is still awake, to his surprise. He tells her he thinks she should leave, given her state, but she replies that she has nowhere to go—her mother would not want her back—and she wants to keep working in the convent. Feeling a bit more comfortable with him now, she asks if his intention when he brought her here was for her to die, and he admits that initially it was. She is shocked by this but does not blame him; it seems a reasonable reaction to how she acted. Still, she wishes that things could be more harmonious between them. He tells her he does not intend to divorce her, but what exactly their future holds remains uncertain.

Chapters 49 through 57 Analysis

In these chapters, Maugham continues to paint a picture of love and devotion in the nuns. Even the "idiot" child that Kitty can hardly bear to look at is loved and accepted by the nuns. Mother Superior, for some reason, is, in Kitty's mind, a stern authority figure. Her actions defy this expectation, though. When Kitty is found playing with the children, she is ashamed, thinking Mother will punish her. Instead, Mother simply smiles at her and tells her she is beautiful.

It may at first seem that Maugham is intentionally trying to advocate Catholicism, or at least Christianity, in his depiction of the convent. The nuns are models of virtue, self-sacrifice, and joy. Chapter 53 is especially striking. The convent is an almost kind of otherworldly, heavenly realm which remains peaceful amid the chaos of the cholera epidemic. The Buddhist monastery, however, is anything but. It is decrepit and falling apart; the gods are dusty—symbolizing, perhaps, that no one really believes in them anymore—and the monks, in contrast to the nuns, are idle and ready to leave. However, it is not clear that Maugham really is trying to make a case for the Christian faith. Kitty continues to ponder the quality which separates the nuns from her, but she is sure that it is not their faith. The nuns, further, make no attempt to convert her (she is a Protestant), and she shows no real inclination to it.

A more likely interpretation is that Maugham is trying to advocate a kind of simple humanism, and this reading is strengthened by Kitty's growing feeling that her adulterous affair is so tiny compared to the death and misery that surrounds them. Surely, Catholics like the nuns would think adultery was a very grave sin. A humanist, who only wanted to stop human suffering, would agree with Kitty that, in the scheme of human events, adultery is minor.



Chapters 58 through 69

Chapters 58 through 69 Summary

Chapter 58: Kitty visits Waddington at his home and meets his Manchu woman. The Manchu speaks no English, but nonetheless is very happy to see Kitty and communicate with her (through Waddington) as best she can. Kitty can tell Waddington has a deep affection for her. He asks Kitty why she wanted to see her, and Kitty replies she was looking for something to make her happy, the same thing which she suspects the nuns possess. Kitty does not say whether she thought the Manchu woman had it, but Waddington suggests that it's the Tao, her religion.

Chapter 59: Kitty continues work at the convent and the sisters take much more interest in her now that they know she is pregnant. One sister even takes time to tell Kitty about the Annunciation, the Biblical scene where Mary learns she will conceive Jesus. Kitty, feeling pity for her husband, hopes to find a way to get him to forgive her, for his sake.

Chapter 60: Kitty and Mother Superior talk on the anniversary of Mother's entrance into the convent. She remembers being both resolved to enter and scared to tell her family, fearing their disappointment. Her mother though, to her surprise, expected and even supported her decision. It was difficult for her father, and Kitty remarks that it would be better not to have a heart at all. Mother counters that it is fortunate to have a heart so she could give it to Jesus Christ.

Chapter 61: Kitty returns home but Walter is late. She loses herself in thought, admiring once again the happiness of the nuns and wishing she could share in it. She reflects on her affair with Charlie: She regrets it, but not as if it were a sin; rather, it seems to her more like a stupid mistake to be forgotten about. The future remains uncertain for her, and the uncertainty almost makes her feel like she will not be around to see it.

Chapter 62: Kitty drifts off to sleep but is awoken by loud knocking. At first she thinks it is Walter, but Waddington comes in and informs her that Walter has fallen ill and that she must come at once. It is cholera, and if they want to see him still alive, they must hurry.

Chapter 63: They arrive at the room where Walter is dying. He is violently ill and barely conscious, but Kitty is told nothing can be done for him any longer. She asks to see him alone and apologizes to him for what she did, hoping to give him peace before he dies. His response confuses her: "The dog it was that died." He goes still and Kitty calls the men back into the room. He has died.

Chapter 64: Kitty and Waddington return to the bungalow. Waddington tells her Walter will be buried the next day.

Chapter 65: Kitty and Waddington attend Walter's modest burial service, presided over by Waddington himself. Afterwards, Kitty asks to talk to Waddington.



Chapter 66: Kitty is still filled with longing and asks Waddington if she thinks the soul survives the body. It is too tragic for her to think that people are mere machines who truly end after death. The nuns, too, give up everything for the next life, and it seems too tragic that they should be laboring in vain. Waddington replies that he does not think they labor in vain; their lives are beautiful no matter what. Kitty has a hard time understanding how that could be, though. She asks him about the Tao, and he briefly explains it, but it makes little sense to Kitty, and he admits it really only makes sense to him when he has been drinking. She asks Waddington if he knows what her husband's last words meant. He says he does not know. He then tells her that it appeared Walter had given himself cholera; perhaps he was experimenting on himself, looking for a cure. She tells him he died of a broken heart and Waddington finally tells her that his last words are the final line of Goldsmith's *Elegy*.

Chapter 67: Kitty returns to work at the convent and is warmly welcomed. The nuns have been praying for her.

Chapter 68: After a week, Mother tells Kitty that it is time for her to go back home to her mother. Kitty tries to convince Mother to let her stay, but it is useless: The epidemic is waning and sisters from another convent will be joining them, so they will have no use for Kitty. Kitty wishes she had the kind of happiness the nuns possess, and she decides to test it by asking whether she is ever sad that she will not see her family again. Mother says that she is, but that she has never regretted her decision; it has made her happier than she ever could have been. Mother asks Kitty to take a package and mail it to the Mother Superior's family and then the nuns give her a warm good-bye.

Chapter 69: Waddington escorts Kitty to the caravan she will be leaving with and bids her goodbye. As she travels through the countryside, Mei-tan-fu begins to seem to her like a distant dream which had some meaning, but she could not yet figure it out.

Chapters 58 through 69 Analysis

The great tumult in her personal life and the time in the convent has made Kitty very reflective. She keeps seeing some quality in the nuns which animates them and makes them happy, but she cannot understand what it is. Her great curiosity causes her to look to the Manchu woman with whom Waddington lives. Her desire to see her almost seems romantic. The "imperial princess" is some kind of Eastern prophet who, she hopes, will reveal to her the secrets of a happy life. Though she is charming, Kitty does not find the answer she wants, and it is safe to say that Waddington's convoluted explanation of Tao after Walter's death convinces Kitty that it is not the path to happiness. At best, it seems, it is a kind of mental drug. Thus, Maugham continues the theme established in an earlier chapter of denigrating Eastern religion.

As Waddington tells her, Walter's final words are from Goldsmith's poem, *Elegy*. The poem is about a rabid dog who bites a man. His friends are afraid that he will die, but, in the end, "The dog it was that died." He is clearly referring to their situation. He had taken her out to Mei-tan-fu in the hopes that she would die, but his anger must have, to



some extent, subsided; at any rate, it did not seem he ever had any intention of directly killing her. So heavy was his heart with grief—and perhaps anger at himself for loving her—that he could not bear to live any longer, and thus he killed himself. It is safe to assume that the story about him being a martyr for science is a feeble lie that Waddington knew Kitty would never believe. Waddington himself had said previously that whatever Walter's intentions were in coming to Mei-tan-fu, they were not those of a curious academic or great humanitarian.

These scenes also shed much light on the relationship between Kitty and Waddington. Kitty very clearly admires Waddington, and throughout her time in Mei-tan-fu, he is a kind of sage for her. Perhaps she began trusting his judgment after he so shrewdly dissected the character of Charlie, despite not knowing him very well. In any case, it is telling that after Walter's death, she goes to him to ask questions about the afterlife and happiness. In such matters, though, Waddington falls short.



Chapters 70 through 80

Chapters 70 through 80 Summary

Chapter 70: On the trip back to Hong Kong (where she will stay only briefly before sailing to England) Kitty ponders how moderate her sadness is over Walter's death. She does not hate him anymore, but she never loved him, and cannot help feeling somewhat liberated by the fact that he is gone. She dreads returning to Hong Kong, but is sure that Townsend will stay out of her way. From the bondage of her relationship with him, she felt free, too, and rejoiced.

Chapter 71: Kitty arrives finally in Hong Kong and is shocked to be greeted by Mrs. Townsend. She had been told by Waddington that Kitty was returning and insists that Kitty stay at their house. Kitty is reluctant—she does not want to see Townsend—but finally caves in to Mrs. Townsend. Mrs. Townsend explains that she used to have such disdain for Kitty, but she was so impressed by Kitty's devotion to her husband in braving the dangers of Mei-tan-fu that she realized she was all wrong about her.

Chapter 72: Kitty arrives at the Townsends' residence and Charlie arrives soon after. They have pleasant, if meaningless, conversation; neither Kitty nor Charlie give any indication of their history.

Chapter 73: The three go to lunch and Kitty realizes that the grotesque mental image she had of Charlie's physical appearance was wrong; he is still a very handsome man, she thinks, even if his personality is crude.

Chapter 74: Kitty finds that she entertains a kind of popularity she had never had before. The Hong Kong socialites, moved by her loss, are eager to spend time with and get to know her.

Chapter 75: Since arriving in Hong Kong, Kitty is alone with Charles for the first time. She still has quite a bit of resentment towards him and makes it clear to him. He tries to defend himself and his actions, saying that what he did was best for both of them. She withdraws to her room to get away from him. Feigning sympathy he follows her and uses consolation as a means of seducing her, and she yields to him.

Chapter 76: Afterward, Kitty is crushed and feels horrible for having had sex with Charlie again. He is unmoved by her shame and leaves her to herself. She is filled with remorse and self-hatred. Coming to Hong Kong, after her experience and reflection in Mei-tan-fu, she had felt like a totally changed woman, but now she has already quickly gone to her old ways which had made her so miserable.

Chapter 77: Kitty decides to leave Hong Kong as soon as possible and she returns to her home and begins packing her belongings. Charlie shows up to talk to her and ask if she is leaving because of what happened between them. She is reluctant to talk to him at all but tells him that she feels degraded after what happened. He asks if the child she



will be having is his, and she denies it, but he points out that she could not be so sure. He leaves, and she feels sick, realizing that he takes pleasure in knowing that his legacy will live on with her.

Chapter 78: On the voyage home, Kitty continues her self-loathing about giving in to Charlie. She realizes now that the path to happiness which she had glimpsed before was much more difficult than she thought, and it would be a challenge to travel it. At one of the stops of the ship, Kitty receives a letter from her mother, expressing grief over Walter's death and telling her she is free to stay with the family while she is pregnant. Her mother is obviously unhappy at the prospect of having her widowed daughter around. Later, Kitty receives two more letters from her father and sister, informing her that her mother is sick and requires an operation. A few days later still, she receives a telegraph informing her that her mother has died.

Chapter 79: Kitty arrives at home early to her father's surprise. Despite his wife's death, he seems to be going about his normal, everyday business. She realizes that her death has been a liberation for him. Though he never tried to show signs of it, she was a burden for him; the entire family looked at him merely as the bread-winner and never really as a part of the family to be loved. He obediently followed her every command, but secretly he must have resented her. Kitty goes upstairs to see her mother's body laying in state and finds herself emotionless; she has no real feelings for her mother anymore. Doris shows up and is quite filled with grief, which surprises Kitty, since their mother had been so hard on her.

Chapter 80: Kitty and her father dine and talk. He tells her that he has accepted a post as a judge in the Bahamas and will have to leave soon. Kitty notes the irony—Mr. Garstin finally has the kind of job Mrs. Garstin always wanted him to have, but only after her death. Kitty thinks for a moment then asks to go with him. He is shocked at first. She realizes he has been so unloved by his family that he is looking forward to escaping it at last. She tells him that she is a changed person now and will do everything she can to make him feel loved. He is moved and accepts. She then reflects aloud that she hopes she has a daughter, so she can avoid the mistakes that her mother made. She wants her daughter to be strong-willed and independent and not have her happiness hinge upon a man. She reflects on her life and feels that she could be happy if she only could live like the nuns.

Chapters 70 through 80 Analysis

For Kitty, leaving Mei-tan-fu is the beginning of her new life. Though she does not hate Walter, she feels liberated now that he is gone. They did not have a happy marriage and she felt trapped inside of it. She also has the example of the nuns to follow, though she is not entirely sure how to live it out in her life. The future is unclear to her, and as promising as it seems to her in some respects, she is not altogether optimistic. When she arrives in Hong Kong and sleeps with Charlie again, she is crushed. All of her hopes at a new life seem to be gone; she went right back to her old ways.



When she arrives back home, she sees in her father—now newly a widower—a chance to redeem herself. She begins to understand what made the nuns so happy, perhaps reflecting on the story of Mother Superior's decision to enter the convent. Mother Superior had been filled with fear after leaving home and asked in prayer to be comforted. The answer she received was that she would receive comfort as soon as she stopped looking for it. The special quality in the nuns that made them so happy was precisely that: They never tried to make others happy; rather, they sacrificed everything they had and gave up all the things people normally associate with being happy. All her life, Kitty had sought happiness and never found it. Her father is an unhappy man, too. He had been largely used and ignored by his family; he was nothing more than a breadwinner. In a way, perhaps, Kitty sees something of Walter in him, and her decision to accompany him to the Bahamas is the first step in living out the life she saw embodied by the French nuns. She would no longer live to make herself happy, but her father.



Characters

Kitty Garstin / Kitty Fane

Kitty is an Englishwoman from a very proper family. From a young age, her mother put a great amount of pressure on her to use her natural beauty to get a man of high social status and with a bright future to marry her. Kitty inherits these values but is unable to find anyone who meets her standards. By the time she is twenty-five—which, for her circumstances, made her desperately old—she gives up on finding an ideal mate and marries Walter Fane, a government biologist who normally lives and works in Hong Kong. She moves out there with him within months.

Throughout the story, Kitty is constantly searching for happiness. She first thinks that living up to the vain social aspirations instilled in her by her mother will make her happy, but all it did lead to was a failed marriage. She thinks Charlie will make her happy, but it turns out that he is just using her and has no intention of ever leaving his wife or changing his circumstances for her sake. It is not until she travels to Mei-tan-fu that she realizes how to achieve happiness through observing the example of the French nuns. The French nuns, of all people in the world she has ever seen, are the ones who spend the least amount of effort trying to make themselves happy or comfortable, and yet they are also the happiest.

When Kitty leaves Mei-tan-fu, she takes this lesson to heart and resolves that, if she has a daughter, she will raise her to be more independent, and avoid the mistakes that her mother made. Her final decision in the book to go with her father to the Bahamas is her first act of self-sacrifice; she decides to live no longer for herself, but to make her father, who for so long felt so unappreciated, happy.

Walter Fane

When Kitty meets Walter Fane, he is a young, shy bacteriologist who is visiting his home in England on vacation from work in Hong Kong. He is, at first, one of many suitors interested in Kitty and not at all exceptional. When he asks Kitty to marry him, she is far from swept off her feet; she only agrees when she realizes that it will be tactically useful for her (it will allow her to marry before her younger sister, for one), and she does not have a lot of options left anyway.

The marriage, from the beginning, is uneasy; Walter is just not a good match for her. Kitty is outgoing and talkative; Walter is quiet and reserved. His conservative nature even continues when he discovers that she has been cheating on him; that is, at least outwardly, he remains calm. Secretly, he is effectively forcing her to come along with him to a region afflicted with a cholera epidemic where he hopes she will die. At some point, his anger towards her turns into self-hatred. He feels a fool for having ever loved



her or for ever having thought they could have a happy marriage. The self-hatred culminates in his suicide.

Charlie Townsend

Charlie Townsend is the Assistant Colonial Secretary in Hong Kong and has ambitions of becoming Colonial Secretary. He is a womanizer, who seduces young women he finds attractive into falling in love with him, leaving them to think he will leave his wife for them, though he has no such intention.

Waddington

Waddington is a customs official in Mei-tan-fu who befriends Kitty when the Fanes arrive. He has a lot of insight into people's inner motives and turns out to be a kind of sage and advisor to Kitty as she struggles to find happiness.

Dorothy Townsend

Dorothy Townsend is the wife of Charlie Townsend. While Kitty is having an affair with Charlie, she thinks Dorothy to be superficial and banal. She sees another side of her when she returns to Hong Kong, however. Dorothy is really a kind and caring person, who has the misfortune, Kitty thinks, of being married to someone like Charlie.

Colonel Yu

Colonel Yu is a Chinese military officer who is helping keep peace in Mei-tan-fu. Apparently his methods are not always entirely honorable, as he is described as a "brigand."

Mother Superior

Mother Superior is the head of the French convent of nuns in Mei-tan-fu. Kitty admires her devotion to the poor and how cheerful she is, but, as an authority figure in the convent, she is somewhat intimidating.

Sister St. Joseph

Like the other nuns in the convent, Sister St. Joseph is to Kitty a model of love and devotion. She has a bit of interest in gossip, however, and thus reveals to Kitty that Waddington has been living with a Manchu woman.



Doris

Doris is Kitty's younger sister. She received less attention from their mother than Kitty did because she was less attractive and Mrs. Garstin wanted a pretty daughter to fetch a "suitable" husband.

Mrs. Garstin

Mrs. Garstin is Kitty's mother. Kitty is not fond of her and even resentful because of the way Mrs. Garstin raised Kitty to only care about having a husband who made good money. Right before Kitty returns home, Mrs. Garstin dies of an illness.

Mr. Garstin

Mr. Garstin is Kitty's father. While the children were growing up, he was neglected and not really counted as a member of the family, just as the bread-winner. Kitty, inspired to change her ways by the nuns, decides to make him feel loved by moving with him to the Bahamas.



Objects/Places

Harrington Gardens

Harrington Gardens is the town where Kitty's family lives in England.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a British colony in China where Walter and Kitty live at the outset of the story.

Mei-tan-fu

Mei-tan-fu is a Chinese province that is afflicted with a cholera epidemic that has claimed the lives of a large percentage of the residents.

Tao

Tao is a religion that is very popular in China whose teachings seem to Kitty nonsensical and contradictory.

Cholera

Cholera is the infection which is taking the lives of many of the Chinese in Mei-tan-fu. Walter commits suicide by giving himself cholera.

The Convent

The convent is where the French nuns live in their mission to the Chinese people. It also serves as an orphanage for the many abandoned children and an infirmary for the many sick people.

Goldsmith's Elegy

Goldsmith's Elegy is a poem about a rabid dog who bit a man. His friends thought he would die, but it turned out that he lived and the dog died. Before dying, Walter utters the poem's last words: He was the dog that died, and Kitty was the person he bit.



The Bungalow

Kitty and Walter live in a bungalow across the river from the town infested with cholera.

The Convent Infirmary

Part of the convent is turned into an infirmary to hold sick people. The nuns forbid Kitty from entering in, citing the fact that cholera can have very disgusting effects on people.

Bahamas

After Kitty's mother dies, she decides to support her long-suffering father and accompany him to his new position in the Bahamas.



Themes

Death as Liberation

Several times in the novel, the death of a character is a liberation for those close to them. The first case is when Walter commits suicide. Kitty felt trapped in the marriage. She had really no other options - her mother would not take her if she left him and she did not have the means to support herself. At the same time, the marriage made her feel horrible. He bored her to begin with, and after the adultery he could hardly bear to look at her. It would be wrong to say Kitty was happy that he died; she said to herself afterward that she thought it was tragic, but tragic in the way you might feel about an acquaintance's death.

When Kitty returns home and her mother is dead, it is a liberation for both Kitty and her father, though in different ways. For Kitty, her mother represented the attitude in life which had made Kitty miserable. Kitty had inherited from her mother the desperation to be married to a rich, respected man and the lust for material happiness. The desperation exhausted her and she saw in the nuns a way out, a different, truer way to be happy. Mrs. Garstin's death, in a way, marks the end of the old Kitty, and the beginning of the new Kitty, recast in the form of the French nuns.

For Mr. Garstin, his wife's death is an escape from a miserable domestic situation. He had always felt, and was always treated, like a mere bread-winner, a man to be appreciated, perhaps, for his material contribution, but never loved as a member of the family. With his new position in the Bahamas, he could finally be free and in some way start anew.

Happiness is Found Only When it is Not Sought

Throughout her life, Kitty has been on a desperate search for happiness. First, she thought she would find it by marrying well; that turned into disappointment and she wound up settling for marrying Walter. When she found herself unhappy with him, she was lured into an affair with Charlie Townsend. She fell in love—something she never experienced with Walter—and envisioned herself as the happy Mrs. Townsend. Charlie, though, had no such intentions. He had been using her and cared more about his comfortable domestic situation and career than her.

When she arrived in Mei-tan-fu, she was thoroughly mired in despair and at times even wished she would die. Things were now worse than ever with Walter and she was heartbroken over Charlie, who had rejected her. She had a glimpse of a different way in the French nuns. Unlike her, these nuns had never sought or particularly cared for their own happiness. Mother Superior belonged to a wealthy, respected family in France and had given a life of privilege up in order to live her life as a prayer to God and service to the poor and needy. Yet, despite this great sacrifice, she was an image of happiness. At



one point, perplexed by this, Kitty asked about the story behind Mother's entry into the convent. She said at first, as she was leaving France, she was filled with dread and prayed to God. She received an answer that she would have comfort as soon as she stopped seeking it. That answer could equally have been given to Kitty.

Renewed with this vision of a different way of life, Kitty determines after returning home that she will live her old way no longer. Her father, so long neglected and abused by the family, would be the object of her service now and she would do everything to make him feel loved and appreciated.

Contrast Between Eastern Religion and Western Religion

While it would be wrong to see *The Painted Veil* as an endorsement of any particular religion, especially Catholicism (W. Somerset Maugham himself is a Protestant), there is an unmistakable case for at least certain elements of that religion and, at the same time, a criticism of Eastern religion. The qualities which Kitty—and Maugham, obviously—admire are clearly direct results of the religion they follow. The love for the poor, sick, and abandoned and the spirit of sacrifice are cardinal virtues of the Catholic religion, and the nuns themselves attribute their happiness to their devotion to Jesus Christ. Kitty even wonders, at times, if she would not be happier, like the nuns, if she shared their faith.

Eastern religions, on the other hand, are presented as dull, boring, and dead. Waddington and Kitty go to a Buddhist monastery one day when Kitty has the day off from work. The monks there are bored and idle. The statues of the gods are covered with dust from disuse. Kitty later asks Waddington what the Tao is—Waddington knows about it since he is living with a local woman—and Waddington gives a convoluted and nonsensical, explanation. Clearly, Kitty realizes that whatever her path to happiness is, the Tao is not it.

The book is certainly not a call to conversion, either explicitly or implicitly, however. The nuns have no intention of trying to convert Kitty as much as they like her, and one of the sisters is even rebuked for mentioning that she wished Kitty was Catholic. Further, when Kitty is pondering the secret quality inside the nuns which makes them both happy and different, she knows at least that it is not their faith.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in a third-person perspective which follows only the thoughts and actions of Kitty. However, while it is a third-person perspective, it is clear that the descriptions are often colored by Kitty's own judgments. Thus for example, in Chapter 7, Kitty's mother is introduced in the following way: "Mrs. Garstin was a hard, cruel, managing, ambitious, parsimonious, and stupid woman" (19). These feelings are obviously Kitty's. In the previous chapter she reflects on why she has a picture of her mother in her room, since she is not very fond of her. Further, when she returns home to Harrington Gardens and sees her mother's dead body lying in state before burial, she sheds no tears and does not feel particularly sad.

Likewise, when Dorothy Townsend, Charlie's wife, is first introduced, it is in clearly unflattering terms, mirroring Kitty's jealousy. She is described as wearing a "mask" of superficiality affected to please others and hiding her true—presumably unpleasant—emotions. However, this judgment is reversed when she meets her again after returning from Mei-tan-fu, and she is described as kind, giving, and patient—even a victim, perhaps, of her selfish husband.

Setting

There are three main settings in this book. The book begins in Hong Kong, where Kitty and Walter live together. Though their exact social class is unclear, they are clearly middle class, and Kitty is resentful that Walter's job as a bacteriologist for the government is not more prestigious, since, evidently, one's husband's job largely determines your social ranking. This dissatisfaction with her place in society is possibly part of her attraction to Charles Townsend, who as Assistant Colonial Secretary, with ambition to become Colonial Secretary, is a much more influential and respected man in Hong Kong. At one point, Kitty even thinks to herself how attractive Charlie's power is.

After her adultery is discovered, Kitty travels with Walter to Mei-tan-fu, a Chinese province struggling with a cholera epidemic. It is evidently a very scenic area and Kitty is so struck with the beauty of seeing the city encircled by its walls that she is brought to tears. Mei-tan-fu becomes a kind of dream-world for Kitty; after she leaves, it seems like none of it was real. This attests, at least in part, to how foreign it is for her. While in Mei-tan-fu, there are signs that she comes to appreciate Chinese culture and history more than she had before.

The French convent is also located in Mei-tan-fu, and Kitty describes it as if it were a separate reality from everything around in it. It seems that it is somehow insulated from all the misery and woes that surround it. The nuns stay cheery and full of happiness;



they daily attend a service in the chapel; the orphan children continue to be instructed in sewing. The nuns do keep an infirmary inside the convent, but Kitty is strictly forbidden from entering it, which helps keep the illusion intact.

After leaving Mei-tan-fu, Kitty returns to England, the place of her birth. As a child and young adult, Harrington Gardens—the town her home is in—is where she inherits from her mother the values which wind up making her so dependent upon men for happiness, which she comes to repudiate when she returns a second time.

Language and Meaning

Maugham writes with a generally simple style, though makes occasional use of more complex sentences which use semi-colons and colons. The level of vocabulary in his writing is often rather sophisticated, though never gratuitous.

The book is written ostensibly from a third-person perspective but the thought, mood, and judgment of Kitty clearly permeates it at times, especially in how the narrator describes characters for which Kitty has strong positive or negative feelings. For example, Walter is described as having attractive features, but as a whole being unattractive, a judgment which seems like it must be colored by her personal disdain for him. The same types of biased descriptions can be seen when the narrator describes Kitty's mother and Dorothy Townsend.

Structure

The book is divided into eighty very brief chapters, few exceeding four or five pages. The book occurs in a basically chronological order, beginning with Walter's discovery of Kitty's adultery. The exceptions to this are chapters six through sixteen, which give Kitty's family background and her brief history in Hong Kong. These chapters start out by detailing her relationship with her mother, which is the foundation of Kitty's personality and value-system through the majority of the book and explains her attraction, at least in part, to Charlie. It is then described how Kitty came to meet and marry Walter—basically out of a mixture of desperation and convenience—and fell in love with Charlie. Chapters seventeen through twenty-seven finish out Kitty's time in Hong Kong.

The next forty-two chapters—chapters twenty-eight through sixty-nine—detail her time in Mei-tan-fu, which makes up the majority of the book. It is during this time that Kitty reflects upon her life and her values and is encouraged by the nuns to change the way she lives. Walter, meanwhile, takes the opposite path, and continues to degenerate into self-hatred, ending ultimately in his suicide.

Walter's death spells the end of Kitty's time in Mei-tan-fu, and in the final eleven chapters she returns briefly to Hong Kong where she has a moral lapse with Charlie. She strengthens her resolve on the way back to England, however, and is heartened in some manner by the death of her mother, who represented her old self and way of life.



Quotes

"They saw the white china knob of the handle slowly turn. They had heard no one walk along the verandah. It was terrifying to see that silent motion. A minute passed and there was no sound. Then, with the ghastliness of the supernatural, in the same stealthy, noiseless, and horrifying manner, they saw the white china knob of the handle at the other window turn also. It was so frightening that Kitty, her nerves failing her, opened her mouth to scream; but, seeing what she was going to do, he swiftly put his hand over it and her cry was smothered in his fingers." (8)

"Mrs. Garstin was a hard, cruel, managing, ambitious, parsimonious, and stupid woman." (19)

"The fact was, of course, that he had no charm. That was why he was not popular, and she had not been long in Hong Kong before she discovered that he was not." (36)

"'I had no illusions about you,' he said. 'I knew you were silly and frivolous and empty-headed. But I loved you.'" (66)

"In a moment she knew what had startled them, for as they stood there, chattering to one another, four peasants passed, quick and silent, bearing a new coffin, unpainted, and its fresh wood gleamed white in the approaching darkness. Kitty felt her heart beat in terror against her ribs." (90)

"'Are you a Catholic? . . . Can any good come out of Galilee? No, I'm not a Catholic. I describe myself as a member of the Church of England, which I suppose is an inoffensive way of saying that you don't believe in anything very much.'" (112)

"'When they leave France they leave it for ever. They're not like the Protestant missionaries who have a year's leave every now and then. I always think that must be the hardest thing of all. We English have no very strong attachment to the soil, we can make ourselves at home in any part of the world, but the French, I think, have an attachment to their country which is almost a physical bond. They're never really at ease when they're out of it. It always seems to me very moving that these women should make just that sacrifice. I suppose if I were a Catholic it would seem very natural to me.'" (113)

"Kitty laughed at the thought that this corpulent, middle-aged nun could ever have been a wayward child. And yet there was something childlike in her still so that your heart went out to her: she seemed to have about her an aroma of the countryside in autumn when the apple trees are laden with fruit and the crops are in and safely housed." (142)

"In the sanctuary sat the Buddha, remote and sad, wistful, abstracted and faintly smiling. There was about everything a sense of dejection; the magnificence was shoddy and ruined; the gods were dusty and the faith that had made them was dying." (149)



"The vivid scenes with their elegant color, their unexpected distinction, and their strangeness, were like an arras before which, like mysterious, shadowy shapes, played the phantoms of Kitty's fancy. They seemed wholly unreal. Mei-tan-fu with its crenelated walls was like the painted canvas placed on the stage in an old play to represent a city. The nuns, Waddington, and the Manchu woman who loved him, were fantastic characters in a masque; and the rest, the people sidling along the tortuous streets and those who died, were nameless supers." (207)

"Let me be frank just this once, father. I've been foolish and wicked and hateful. I've been terribly punished. I'm determined to save my daughter from all that. I want her to be fearless and frank. I want her to be a person, independent of others because she is possessed of herself, and I want her to take life like a free man and make a better job of it than I have." (245)

"The sun rose, dispelling the mist, and she saw winding onwards as far as the eye could reach, among the rice-fields, across a little river and through undulating country the path they were to follow: perhaps her faults and follies, the unhappiness she had suffered, were not entirely vain if she could follow the path that she dimly discerned before her, not the path that kind funny old Waddington had spoken of that led nowhither, but the path those dear nuns at the convent followed so humbly, the path that led to peace." (245-246)



Topics for Discussion

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?

What is the significance of Walter's dying words?

Explain the relationship between Waddington and Kitty.

Why is Kitty so upset when she has sex with Charlie after returning to Hong Kong?

What is the new path Kitty has discovered that is mentioned in the closing words of the novel?