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## **The Painted Veil**

Romantic tales can take many forms; some are sugary sweet with illogical storylines and even more illogical conclusions. The film *The Painted Veil* (2006) by director John Curran, an adaptation of the W. Somerset Maugham novel, forgoes sugar for pungent truths. This story is steeped in the painful emotions of betrayal, resentment and the realities of marrying for the wrong reasons. Viewers are taken on a visually stunning and emotionally charged journey to the meat of the heart where love is not always gentle or syrupy, yet can bloom unexpectedly even when scorned and surrounded by death. *The Painted Veil* explores the devastating emotional consequences of infidelity, and the difficult, if not impossible, road to redemption and reconciliation.

Set in 1920s China, *The Painted Veil* stars Edward Norton as an English middle-class, lackluster bacteriologist named Walter Fane who lives and works in Shanghai. While on a trip to London he meets and quickly proposes marriage to the young, selfish, upper-class socialite Kitty Garstin played by Naomi Watts. She irresponsibly accepts his marriage proposal, not for love, but to rebel against her mother.

Walter whirls her away to Shanghai, where she quickly becomes bored and the two realize they have little in common and nothing to talk about. An immature and reckless young woman, Kitty engages in a sordid affair with a married British diplomat named Charles Townsend played by Liev Schreiber. Walter learns of their affair and is determined to punish his wife. He gives her two choices: either join him on a treacherous journey to a remote, cholera-infested village where he has volunteered his expertise, or endure the disgrace and embarrassment of a public divorce.

Kitty reluctantly agrees to join Walter after Townsend, whom she professes to love, refuses to leave his wife. As revenge for his wife's unfaithfulness Walter makes the journey to the village more arduous and unbearable than it needs to be. The resentment between the two characters grows and festers like the diseases that surround them. In addition to the cholera epidemic, China is experiencing a civil uprising against British colonization and tensions are running high.

Walter is intelligent, yet has a cold passive-aggressive nature. He and Kitty rarely speak and they seem to loathe one another. The two practically wish death upon each other as played out in a scene where Kitty purposefully and rebelliously eats raw vegetables after Walter warns against it due to possible contamination with the cholera-causing bacteria. She eats them to spite him, and he follows suit to spite her like a dangerous game of Russian roulette.

As the film progresses through beautiful, tranquil sweeping landscape shots of China, both Kitty and Walter are on a personal journey of inner discovery. Kitty grows bored at home and visits a local orphanage hoping for an occupation to curb her boredom. This is when her character starts to wizen and deepen. As she matures the viewers see her shallowness subside and her compassion for others grow. At the orphanage, Kitty sees a side of her husband she has never known – a compassionate and altruistic man risking his own health to care for the sick and dying.

Walter's vision of his wife also starts to soften. The more they learn about each other their mutual respect grows and the anger and bitterness subsides. A somber, sobering love, rather than romantic or passionate love begins to bloom amidst the death and turmoil surrounding them.

Shortly after their emotional reconciliation, Kitty learns she is pregnant. Neither she nor Walter knows if the baby is his or Townsend's. This becomes a reminder of the initial betrayal that brought them to the diseased-ridden village. But instead of resentment or anger, Walter accepts her and it becomes clear they will move forward past the betrayal.

But this tale does not end with a "happily ever after." Shortly after they learn of the pregnancy, Walter succumbs to the gruesome cholera and dies after asking Kitty to forgive him. The scene flashes forward five years and Kitty and her son bump into Townsend on the streets of London. Uncomfortable, she quickly takes her leave and when her son asks who the man was she simply states "someone of no importance."

### **Analysis using Keys to Media Literacy<sup>(1)</sup>:**

**Title:** The title tells viewers the premise of the story. A veil is used to cover something up. The term "painted veil," comes from a sonnet by poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Lift not the painted veil which those who live call life."<sup>(2)</sup> The title alludes to the lifting of illusions and revealing truths. Lead actor Edward Norton described his interpretation of the meaning, "We often fall in love with the illusions we have of about a person rather than who they really are. That is the 'painted veil' that is in front of our vision of the truth and when those illusions get torn away it can be process of disenchantment and pain."<sup>(3)</sup>

Historical Context: The film takes place in China during the 1920s. During this time many villages were facing a devastating cholera epidemic and at the same time a new China was emerging, nationalists were rebelling and fighting against British rule.

Foreshadowing: The night Kitty is introduced to Townsend they are watching a play at a Chinese theater. Townsend translates the storyline about a young girl weeping because she has been sold into a life of slavery and taken away to a foreign land. She is sad because she has been condemned to this life in which she will never find happiness, never be loved or love in return. This is a striking description of the life that Kitty will soon know. Shortly after watching this play, her and Townsend's affair begins, and she is soon taken away to a very foreign land where she feels enslaved, alone, unloved and unable to love.

Plot: Explicit Content: Kitty and Walter get married, but she has an affair. Walter takes revenge by forcing her to accompany him to a disease-ridden Chinese village where she will be miserable. Yet somehow misery awakens enlightenment, reconciliation and redemption.

Plot: Implicit Content: The motive behind Kitty's affair can be attributed to marrying Walter for the wrong reasons. She never loved him, respected him or had any interest in him, but rather married him to spite her mother. Her character is selfish, impulsive and rebellious. Her affair with Townsend could have been to simply rebel against her husband whom she didn't love. Walter's motive for avenging her affair by taking her to a cholera-infested village shows him as a malicious and calculating, rather than confrontational personality. Instead of bursting into the bedroom when he knew his wife was cheating on him, he decided upon cold, calculated punishment by enslaving his wife into a life where she would be miserable.

Sub Plots: The relationship between their neighbor Waddington and his Chinese wife forces Kitty to examine her own relationship. Another sub plot is the motives of the French nuns operating the orphanage which help Kitty become more self-aware, but also reinforces the cultural conflicts between the East and the West. The cholera epidemic adds a rich sub plot, as does the emerging Chinese nationalism, and tensions between East and West.

GENRE: Dramatic historical romance

Formulaic Function: Order/Chaos/Order.

Manifest Objective: To elicit emotional responses of sadness, loneliness, uneasiness, empathy, understanding and eventually emotional resolution.

Latent Message: Love and forgiveness are possible even after betrayal and revenge.

Formulaic Plot: *The Painted Veil* explores the devastating emotional consequences of infidelity, and the difficult, if not impossible, road to redemption and reconciliation.

#### CONCLUSION:

Character Development: Both Kitty and Walter's characters grow and evolve through self-discovery. Kitty grows from a selfish, shallow young woman, to a mature and compassionate person who accepts and suffers the consequences of her poor choices. She learns to love and respect her husband for whom she initially felt no emotions.

Walter's character grows as he sheds his cold exterior and allows himself to forgive Kitty and see her in a new light. He acknowledges that when he married her he didn't really know her, but rather created qualities in her which he wished she had, and not ones she actually possessed. He comes to acknowledge that he was also to blame for marital problems. It is evident by this dying plea for forgiveness that he feels guilty for bringing her to the disease-ridden village. This is a sign of growth in him. Earlier in the story there was no sign of guilt, in fact, the viewer is often left wondering if he brought her there in hopes she would die from cholera.

Logical Ending: Although some may argue that it is an illogical conclusion that Walter and Kitty are able to find love and acceptance of each other toward the end of the film, I would argue that the portrayal of raw human emotion, anger, resentment, guilt and finally acceptance is logical. The characters are never happy in the film; it is more of a somber acknowledgement of growing respect for each other that didn't exist before the betrayal. They are able to put their bitterness aside, find companionship and mutual understanding.

There is no "happily ever after" in this film, which would indeed have been illogical. In the end, Walter dies from cholera and Kitty goes back to London alone and pregnant. Yet the intended message of the film was clear: there are devastating emotional consequences for betrayal and infidelity, but reconciliation is possible.

#### PRODUCTION VALUES:

Imagery: The gorgeous cinematography of sweeping, breathtaking images of an idyllic, seemingly mythical Chinese landscape sets the stage, the location and time period of the story. Yet, within the idyllic beauty is also immense suffering as the cholera epidemic and political turmoil ravages the landscape. The scenery serves as symbolic for Walter and Kitty's relationship. Although they seem like a healthy young married couple to those they initially meet, just as the Chinese landscape seems picture perfect, inside there is immense suffering,

grief and turmoil. The film is produced in a way that makes the viewer, like the main characters, always feel like a foreigner in an unfamiliar land uncertain of what will happen next.

Performance: Wardrobe: The director sets the scene beautifully with period appropriate mannerisms, hair styles, attire and even the appropriate physical physiques of the actors. Edward Norton had to lose muscle mass in his shoulders, as Englishmen in that time period did not have the same body build that men do today. <sup>(4)</sup>

Performance: Verbal and Non-Verbal: Much of Walter and Kitty's communication is non-verbal. He avoids conversations with her, and if he must talk to her for the first half of the film it is angry, short and irritated tones. He hardly looks at her, but rather at the floor or walls emphasizing his ill-feelings toward her and his hurt by her betrayal. Characters in this movie rarely smile.

Sound: The dramatic and emotionally provocative soundtrack conjures emotions in the viewers. The piano plays a reoccurring symbol in the film connecting the characters to their past life (London socialite) and their current life (playing piano to orphans of the cholera epidemic). The sound of the piano is a key component to the powerful soundtrack.

Color: The beginning of the film shows gorgeous bright colors, however once the betrayal occurs, the colors become more muted. A lot of dead colors like grays and very drab blues that create the impact of sadness, loneliness and unease <sup>(1)</sup>.

Lighting: Early in the film, before the betrayal, the lighting is bright and cheerful. However, post-affair the lighting is dim and filled with shadows creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness <sup>(1)</sup>.

In conclusion, every aspect of the film *The Painted Veil* from the landscape setting, to sound production, script and stage performance of the actors successfully tells a powerful and provocative tale of betrayal, revenge and the immense emotional havoc that infidelity reaps on relationships. It is also a story about self-awareness, and a cautionary tale to be wary of the "painted veil." Don't fall in love with an illusion; get to truly know your love-interest to avoid disenchantment and pain when the truths are revealed. In the end *The Painted Veil* tells a somber tale of betrayal, consequence, self-discovery and the difficult road to redemption.

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