

Emilie Rubayita

16 June 2022

The evolution of Kitty's character in the novel *The Painted Veil* by W. Somerset Maugham

The Painted Veil is a brilliant book that tells the story of Kitty Fane, a young woman who finds herself in an unhappy marriage after entering it with superficial social ambitions. It centers around the young British couple as they move to the Chinese countryside in the 1920s. From the beginning, the protagonist, Kitty Fane, can be described as depraved, egotistical, and shallow. However, as the story progresses her character grows and undergoes a transformation. This paper will look at how Kitty's character develops from a self-centered, arrogant girl, to a strong, caring woman due to her experiences with Charlie Townsend, her time in Mei-tan-fu, her pregnancy, as well as Walter's death. Kitty Fane's initial self-centeredness is displayed the moment she ties the knot with Walter Fane. Her mother, Mrs. Garstin, was very offended that Kitty had not yet married and saw her to be far overage when she should have been in the prime of her maidenhood; consequently, Kitty decides to date Walter, despite finding him to be humorless and extremely boring. She also does this to get away from her mother who constantly pressured her and made her feel ashamed. Her mother is a bossy, materialistic, narrow-minded woman whose goal is to give her daughters a high-class life. As a result, Kitty's aspirations of marrying Walter were in vain as she married just for her advantage, and she married Walter although she didn't love nor care about him. "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 53).

A few days after arriving in Hong Kong as newlyweds, Kitty immediately realizes that Walter is a dry and uninteresting guy who often irritates her with his displays of love and affection. When she meets another man, Charlie Townsend, he catches her eye as he is the complete antithesis of Walter, and she begins to have an affair with him. "Of course he had charm, that was what made him so nice..." "His eyes were so very blue, and they laughed tenderly, persuading you of the gentleness of his disposition. He was tall, at least six feet, and had a wonderful form" (Maugham 31). Her relationship with Townsend gives her a chance to get away from her sad and dull life with Walter. All things considered, Kitty Fane is not a character to sympathize with. This is the epitome of Kitty Fane's self-centeredness, in which she fails to consider the feelings, opinions, and preferences of others around her, even while making decisions. Kitty is arrogantly unconcerned and feels as though Walter is not man enough to do anything about her affair. 'Walter doesn't give me the sense of a guy who would want to wash his dirty laundry in public,' she says to Charlie (Maugham 43). The most egotistical of her views is that Charlie Townsend is in love with her, and will not hesitate to leave Mrs. Townsend and marry her instead, "He loves me with all his heart and soul... We're sick to death of secrecy and compromise and all the rest of it." (Maugham 53). Unfortunately for her, this naive fairytale of her affair is shut down when she confronts Charlie. Kitty realizes that Charlie is a coward, a liar, and an egomaniac.

Kitty's husband, Walter Fane, a critical biologist, plans to end her relationship with Townsend and move her to Mei-tan-fu, a Chinese province with cholera where he has volunteered to work as a doctor and researcher (Maugham, 55). An awakening occurs during Kitty Fane's stay in Mei-Tan Fu. When Kitty recognizes her own adultery and hubris, she tries to

reconcile with Walter, who has turned cold, bitter, and distant towards her. Kitty tries to redeem herself by helping the French nuns with the children, though this is only to get away from boredom. It is now that she starts to admire her husband through his devotion to his patients, his kindness to the children, and his overall morals and virtues. Because of Kitty's sincere efforts, we no longer see her as the treacherous woman she was before, but as someone who has learned from her mistakes and cares about others around her. Love and admiration for Walter begin to emerge from Kitty, as she finally shows interest in his work and even worries about his well-being. She gradually senses Walter's virtues and changes her opinion of him, and begins to think about the significance of her own existence and the value that she can bring to others (Pan, 150). Similarly, although Kitty initially regarded Waddington as "unappealing," she overlooks his appearance and develops a genuine friendship with him because of his demeanor. This is unlike the Kitty that is described at the beginning of the novel, as that version would likely never befriend someone who wasn't attractive and of high social status.

Alongside the Chinese orphans and the French nuns, Mother Superior also plays a major part in Kitty's change as they spend a lot of time together at the orphanage. At first, Kitty has a cultural shock and is insensitively repulsed by the orphans and ill individuals. Because of Mother Superior, however, Kitty quickly learns to love and care for everyone around her and acquires empathy rather than merely thinking about herself. Mother Superior is the driving force behind Kitty's growth and transformation. "Beauty is a gift of God, one of the rarest and most valuable, and we should be glad if we are happy enough to possess it, and thankful if we are not, that others possess it for our pleasure" (Maugham, 127). Additionally, Kitty finds in the selfless

Mother Superior a mother figure whom she can love and learn from; something she lacked in her relationship with her own mother.

The Painted Veil depicts a woman's journey toward spiritual liberation and maturity. It was impressive how Kitty Fane's character evolved throughout the story, as she exhibited amazing resiliency in facing challenges in a new and unfamiliar world. Kitty's complete transformation becomes evident when she develops from a self-centered, arrogant girl, to a strong, caring woman due to her experiences with Charlie Townsend, her time in Mei-Tan-Fu, her unplanned pregnancy, as well as Walter's death. This evolution is due to the fact that she was forced to live in Mei-Tan Fu, where people were dying everywhere, and although she becomes depressed, she is able to reflect and be ashamed of previous ideals. She no longer prioritizes the luxurious life of parties, males, rich food and friends, and maintaining her social status; instead, she focuses on being more compassionate, caring, and open-minded. The eventual result is a matured version of Kitty who takes responsibility for what she did and tries to make things right for her family's future. She picks herself up and finds a way to start over with her child. The past experience and the impact of the unhappy marriage made Kitty sorely aware that she should not blindly attach herself to material things or someone else, but be independent in personality and spirit, and have the courage to pursue her own happiness (Yang & Wang, 219). Overtime, Kitty Fane gets rid of the original emptiness step by step, from filling her heart with lust and not knowing the direction of life, to being rich and firm in deep and truly possessing peace and strength (Pan, 149). There is evident character development as she learns from her mistakes and experiences growth, self-discovery, and most of all, redemption.

Works Cited

Maugham, Somerset William. *The Painted Veil*. London: Vintage Classics, 2001. Print.

Dolor, L.I. *Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh.*

New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.

Pan, Yitong. “From The Painted Veil to Its Screen Version: The Changing Journey of Salvation and the Unchanging Spiritual Destination.” *Atlantis Press*, vol. 559, 2021, p. 149.,

<https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210609.030>.

Yang, Bailian, and Wang, Guilian. “Kitty’s Awakening of Female Consciousness in the Painted Veil.” *Sino-US English Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 7, 2020,

<https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8072/2020.07.004>.