

# The Metaphor of Disease in Maugham's *The Painted Veil*

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## Abstract

As a renowned British author, W. Somerset Maugham is known for his bold and unusual works. In *The Painted Veil*, the vain Kitty holds herself in high regard, flitting between numerous suitors with great satisfaction. However, as she reaches marriageable age, she still fails to find a suitable partner. The dull Walter, aware of her superficiality, persistently pursues her, and they eventually marry and move to Hong Kong. After their marriage, however, Kitty does not treat Walter sincerely and instead engages in an inappropriate relationship with the local official, Charlie. When this infidelity is revealed, the taciturn Walter, filled with rage, threatens to take Kitty to the cholera-infested city of Mei Tan Fu. Disease is an inescapable issue for humanity, permeating every aspect of society and affecting human emotions, joys, sorrows, and relationships. Cholera holds significant metaphorical meaning in *The Painted Veil*. As Susan Sontag discusses in her book "Illness as Metaphor," disease is often associated with death, despair, filth, chaos, and indulgence. In this context, cholera symbolizes the punishment for Kitty's indulgence and her affair, as well as Walter's deliberate revenge and desire to put his wife in danger. The cholera outbreak complicates their emotions and witnesses their growth and transformation.

## Keywords

W. Somerset Maugham; *The Painted Veil*; Disease; Susan Sontag; Illness as Metaphor.

## 1. Introduction

The paper is divided into three chapters: the first chapter serves as an introduction, outlining the author Maugham and the main content of the novel "The Painted Veil." The second chapter discusses the various concepts mentioned by Sontag in "Illness as Metaphor." The third chapter analyzes the metaphorical significance of cholera as a highly infectious and deadly disease in the book.

Through these three chapters, the paper aims to demonstrate that the various metaphors of disease in Maugham's "The Painted Veil" play an important role in advancing the plot, shaping character development, and revealing themes. Additionally, studying plague literature offers significant warnings for human development in the post-pandemic era.

## 2. Disease in Maugham's "The Painted Veil"

W. Somerset Maugham's "The Painted Veil" is inspired by a story from Dante's "Divine Comedy." In the "Purgatory" section of "Divine Comedy," a similar tale unfolds: Pia, a woman from Siena, is suspected of infidelity by her husband. However, due to her powerful family, he dares not kill her. Instead, he takes her to his castle in Maremma, hoping that the poisonous air will kill her. When Pia does not fall ill, he throws her out of the window. Maugham was intrigued by the idea of an abandoned husband forcing his wife into a dangerous environment, and the potential experiences she might undergo there. When writing "The Painted Veil," he decided to adapt this story to a modern setting and changed its conclusion.

This short novel primarily tells the story of the protagonist, Kitty, who marries the bacteriologist Walter, whom she does not love, to escape the pressures from her mother and the fact that her sister has already married. She follows him to Hong Kong, only to find life there equally tedious. Unable to tolerate her dull husband, she engages in an affair with the local official, Charlie. Furious, Walter decides to take her to the cholera-ridden city of Mei Tan Fu. There, Walter is busy with his work, while Kitty meets local nuns under the guidance of the deputy customs officer, Worthington. After spending some time with the nuns, she begins to gain a deeper understanding of life. The fragility of life and the nuns' compassion for the sick help her rediscover the meaning of existence, and she embarks on a true pursuit of life's significance.

Although Kitty is a well-educated and beautiful young woman, her lazy and indecisive nature prevents her from finding a suitable partner. Even after marrying Walter and moving to Hong Kong, she fails to change, remaining unambitious and disdainful of her husband's character and lowly job, while repeatedly engaging in infidelity. Walter, though taciturn and inept at expressing himself, takes Kitty to the terrifying cholera-infested area out of revenge after learning of her affair. Nevertheless, as a bacteriologist, he is a decent, compassionate, and knowledgeable man, earning the praise of the nuns and midwives in the convent.

Through Kitty's perspective, "The Painted Veil" offers a vivid depiction of cholera in Mei Tan Fu. The streets are desolate, and passersby appear like ghosts, listless; many dead bodies are simply rolled up and taken away, with people dying "like flies." The sick moan helplessly, their cries "seeming not to be human," enveloping Kitty in despair and fear of death. The local convent is repurposed to treat the sick, and several French nuns refuse to evacuate, staying in the medical ward to care for dying patients. The dead men at the foot of the residential walls and the horrifying screams from the medical ward haunt Kitty for a long time.

As Kafka said, "Illness repeatedly reminds me of my weakness and fully reveals the miracle of life." The cholera outbreak in Mei Tan Fu starkly illustrates human frailty and helplessness in the face of disaster, while also showcasing the miracle of life. Under the care of the nuns and midwives, Chinese children manage to survive amidst the ravaging cholera.

After spending some time in the convent in Mei Tan Fu, Kitty gradually begins to recognize the fragility of life. The nuns' and her husband's meticulous care for the sick exemplifies a spirit of love and selflessness, along with their steadfast faith, helping her find meaning in life and become more mature.

### 3. Illness as Metaphor

Aristotle said, "Metaphor is the application of the name of one thing to another." A metaphor replaces one thing with the name of another, similar to the referential relationship between phenomenon and essence, and between words and things. Usually, the phenomenon refers to the essence, and the word refers to the thing. This referential relationship creates signs of separation between phenomenon and essence, and between words and things, leading to some degree of interpretive bias. Some scholars believe that metaphors contain a certain mythos, and metaphorical thinking is, to some extent, a form of mythological thought.

In "Illness as Metaphor," Susan Sontag examines how illness becomes increasingly metaphorical, transforming from a physiological condition into a moral judgment of individuals or society. The uncontrollable nature of illness contradicts scientific rationality, endowing it with a certain mystique and creating the potential for it to be transformed into a metaphor. The metaphors of illness span multiple domains, including aesthetics, morality, politics, and race.

From an aesthetic perspective, the intense pain caused by illness often leads to its symptoms being used to represent the patient or to be placed in metaphorical contexts. For example, smallpox typically leaves scars, colloquially referred to as "pockmarks," which in Chinese can

also denote someone who has had smallpox and bears those scars. Sontag argues that illness itself is not a metaphor; viewing illness as a metaphor effectively demonizes it, transforming it into something evil and insurmountable, or even synonymous with death. This shift in perception transfers the fear of death onto illness and attributes the cause of illness to the patient, creating a moral hierarchy that leaves patients feeling inferior.

Moreover, Sontag points out, "Even if the epidemic is not considered a divine judgment upon a certain group, as long as one traces the consequences back to the source, it inevitably becomes a kind of judgment from above, suggesting an unstoppable collapse of morals and customs" (38). In social and political life, illness is often used as a metaphor to accuse society of corruption or injustice, expressing anxiety about social order through the lens of disease. In political discourse, illness is similarly employed as a symbol of political evil and something that merits punishment. For instance, Stalinism was referred to by its opponents as cholera, syphilis, and cancer.

Sontag believes there is a connection between people's imaginations of illness and their perceptions of the "other." When illness is equated with evil and the foreign, it becomes linked with the "other." European nations, considering themselves a superior race with a superior culture, assume they are "immune to disease" while ignoring the diseases and disasters they impose on others. They view themselves as victims of foreign diseases, infusing the origins of these illnesses with an exotic quality. This Eurocentrism reinforces the association between disease and the foreign or exotic, converting moral prejudice about illness into "social discrimination, exclusion, or even social oppression and harm" (Sun Wenbo, Hu Kai 45). Illness thus becomes a means of sustaining Orientalism, fulfilling the West's collective imagination of the East.

#### 4. The Power of Cholera as a Metaphor

Sontag notes the significance of cholera in metaphorical thinking. The panic caused by cholera primarily stems from its highly contagious nature and rapid spread, with symptoms such as severe vomiting, diarrhea, and prostration, which are considered disgraceful. Therefore, cholera is seen as a punishment, a divine retribution for the guilty. An author wrote in *The New York Times* (April 22, 1866): "Cholera is particularly a punishment for those who disregard sanitary regulations; it is a curse upon the dirty, the indulgent, and the depraved" (Sontag 128).

In *Death in Venice*, cholera serves as a punishment for the protagonist Aschenbach's unrequited love. In *The Painted Veil*, cholera can be viewed as punishment for Kitty's infidelity towards her husband, and also as punishment for Walter's vengeful intentions against her.

Sontag argues that discussing an event makes it seem real, thereby increasing people's awareness of risk and the need for restraint (145). In *The Painted Veil*, the severe situation of cholera in Mei Tan Fu is emphasized with repeated references to "people dying like flies." Upon her arrival in Mei Tan Fu, Kitty is in anguish due to Charlie's rejection, while the rampant plague and continuous deaths envelop her in fear, making her cautious for her own safety. However, after Worthington tells her that eating raw food is forbidden in Mei Tan Fu, equating it to suicide during this sensitive time, Kitty knowingly risks it as an extreme form of revenge against Walter. She eats calmly, diverting the conversation with humor and self-deprecation to mask her complex emotions.

Meanwhile, Walter is also filled with contradictions. He loves his wife but, due to her betrayal, desires to use cholera to take her life while also feeling guilty about it. He struggles between "good" and "evil." Walter embodies the Apollonian spirit—rational, responsible, and self-disciplined—while Kitty, engaged in an affair with Charlie, reflects the seductive, irrational, and chaotic Dionysian spirit (Yuan Si 35). Cholera exacerbates the opposition and conflict between

the two protagonists, placing their clash at the brink of death. In the novel, Walter ultimately contracts cholera and dies; Maugham implies through Worthington that Walter's death may have been intentional. Upon learning that Kitty is pregnant but that he may not be the father, Walter is utterly heartbroken. Rationality compels him to decide to take his beloved away from this dangerous place, yet emotionally, he cannot forgive himself. He believes he failed to see Kitty for who she truly is, dressing her in finery like a beautiful doll to be worshipped, only to find that the doll is stuffed with sawdust. "He cannot forgive himself, nor can he forgive her. His soul is torn apart; he has lived under a false conception. When the truth shatters the illusion, he believes reality itself has been shattered. This is true: he will not forgive her because he cannot forgive himself" (Maugham 2016). He blames his own failings, and as he struggles on the brink of death from cholera, he tells Kitty, "The dead one is a dog," humbly viewing Kitty as the "good person" who gave him the chance to love her, while he perceives himself as the dog who was granted a home. Cholera becomes synonymous with punishment for evil, igniting an apocalyptic sentiment that allows Walter's passion to triumph over the constraints of his everyday life, leading him to irrational actions. However, Walter believes that bringing Kitty to Mei Tan Fu out of a non-rational desire for revenge, intending to punish her for her indulgence and infidelity with cholera, is unforgivable. He believes he has harmed Kitty and, in the end, punishes his own irrational thoughts and sins with cholera. His sinful intentions do not manifest; they cease with his death, and thus, Walter's once-fallen heart achieves a transcendence and redemption from worldly ties.

Conversely, from Kitty's perspective, Walter is the "good person" who cares for and loves her, while the unfaithful Kitty is the "dog" that betrays the good man. When Walter proposes to go to Mei Tan Fu to treat local patients and conduct bacteriological research, Kitty's fear of cholera leads her to believe that his actions are "outright suicide." At that time, the cause of cholera was still unknown, and people regarded it as a highly lethal and incurable disease, linking the act of going to cholera-stricken Mei Tan Fu with death. This further reinforced the metaphorical implications of cholera as punishment for Kitty's infidelity. After arriving in Mei Tan Fu, when Kitty mistakenly interprets her pregnancy-related vomiting as cholera infection, her inner fear causes her to faint. She feels "captured by fear, struggling for a while, resisting that unbearable demon which seemed to flow through her veins" (Maugham 2016). Overwhelmed by fear, Kitty likens the dreadful cholera to an "unbearable demon," transforming the disease into the most evil and terrifying thing, which becomes her greatest punishment for her transgressions. However, unlike Walter, the punishment cholera inflicts on Kitty is more spiritual. She realizes how ignorant her past self was and how her priorities paled in comparison to Walter's integrity and kindness. Compared to the selfless nuns and midwives, her past self seems trivial, as if "a person who has lived by a small pond all their life suddenly sees the ocean... their heart filled with joy" (Maugham 2016). Through deep interactions with the midwives and nuns in the convent, and after working and caring for orphans there, the arrogant and disdainful Kitty who once looked down on her husband has died.

The archway symbolizes a woman's chastity and serves as an irreparable sin for Kitty. Although her time in Mei Tan Fu brings significant spiritual change and elevation, her feelings towards Walter remain heavy with regret. Walter's departure represents an unrepayable loss for her, and the archway, which symbolizes chastity, appears both when Kitty enters and leaves Mei Tan Fu, but with vastly different implications. The first time Kitty sees the archway, she only perceives its outer beauty illuminated by the sunset. By the time she leaves, however, she has gained a deeper understanding of its implied meaning.

Upon returning to Hong Kong, Kitty briefly falls back into the slavery of desire, but once she awakens to reality, she immediately decides to leave. Her time in the plague-ridden Mei Tan Fu feels like a grueling struggle, and she emerges victorious in her battle against cholera, moral decay, and indulgence. When she reunites with her father, she confesses, "I have always been

foolish, immoral, and detestable. I have faced harsh punishment and am determined to keep my daughter far away from all this." Ultimately, Kitty removes her mask and unveils the veil of this world, allowing her to see her truest, most genuine desires and the reality of existence.

As Li Junyu notes, "Maugham chooses Mei Tan Fu as the site of the plague, setting the story in a foreign environment, merging an Eastern sensibility with a Western existential narrative to reveal the veil, enabling Kitty to rediscover herself and her husband Walter" (84). Against the backdrop of rampant cholera, at the edge of life and death, Kitty finds an opportunity to re-evaluate both herself and Walter. After experiencing what is perceived as death and despair through cholera, Kitty embraces a renewed self.

The moral and social metaphors of disease have long overshadowed its pathological factors, transforming the understanding of disease from an individual concern to a collective, national, or even ethnic one (Zou Jun 67). For instance, in modern China, disease was viewed as a metaphor for the weakness of the Chinese nation, with people labeled as "the sick man of East Asia." This stems not only from European centrism and its racial and cultural superiority complex but also from a deeply ingrained belief in the exotic origins of diseases, as well as discrimination, exclusion, and even oppression against other regions. Europeans, who considered themselves the center of the world, held a consistent impression of China as dirty and chaotic. Maugham repeatedly uses Kitty's perspective to describe the disorderly and filthy streets of China, filled with weeks-old, foul-smelling garbage, where people wear tattered clothing as if they had emerged from a dump. Such descriptions of Mei Tan Fu's filthy environment imply a moral judgment against the locals, suggesting that the outbreak of cholera is due to their uncleanness and disorder, thus subjecting the sick and dying to moral condemnation and discrimination, seeing those infected with cholera as morally inferior. Disease becomes a symbol of national weakness.

Moreover, some scholars argue that "the initial intention behind Western medicine entering China was not merely to treat the physical body, but rather to promote ideological transformation" (Zou Jun 67). Western doctors, missionaries, and nuns sought to treat the Chinese to demonstrate their moral and charitable intentions, aiming to conquer Chinese culture with Western thought. In *\*The Painted Veil\**, Worthington tells Kitty that Watson came to Mei Tan Fu out of love for humanity, but Walter's motivations for treating patients are not driven by compassion for the dying Chinese or concern for the tens of thousands succumbing to cholera. As a Western missionary, Watson's benevolent acts of treating diseases conceal the intention to spread Western ideology and conquer Eastern culture. Disease thus becomes a weapon for ideological assimilation. In contrast, Walter uses disease as a means to punish his wife, viewing cholera as a curse for the indulgent and a punishment for himself. Cholera is equated with death and despair, and those afflicted are seen as morally inferior.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout history, epidemics have periodically struck, causing severe losses to human life and property. However, after the end of each epidemic, people do not always learn from the experience, failing to address issues such as interpersonal indifference, economic decline, and resource shortages, leading to panic in subsequent outbreaks. After enduring three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity needs to reflect on the past three years of ecological destruction and the darker aspects of human nature as a warning for itself.

From the perspective of epidemiological psychology, *\*The Painted Veil\** offers realistic insights into how humans interact with epidemics, how individuals cope during an outbreak, and how to timely rebuild social order, moral order, and psychological order after a pandemic. In the novel, Charlie, as an official, is indifferent to the plague affecting nearby villages. When he learns of Kitty's husband Walter dying from the dreadful epidemic, he and his wife merely express the

decorum and courtesy expected of their social class, finding the news of the plague, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of Chinese lives, less significant than the latest polo match. The cholera epidemic exposes their selfish and base nature. The political maladies and the ugly aspects of humanity revealed by the cholera serve as a wake-up call.

In contrast, the optimism and perseverance of the abbess and the nuns encourage those suffering from the epidemic, reminding them that the only way to overcome the plague is to cherish life, respect nature, and unite in courage against disaster. Only by doing so can individuals elevate themselves after calamity and prevent the recurrence of similar disasters. When another catastrophe strikes, the spirit of sacrifice and dedication learned from past trials can help humanity unite to overcome challenges and restore their homes (Zeng Wenqian 70).

Literary metaphors of disease provide enlightenment and warnings for humanity, yet in the real world, diseases must be "stripped of their metaphors," and the moral judgment against the sick must "be exposed, criticized, scrutinized, and exhausted" (Sontag). As Maugham noted, "Disease itself is innocent, guiltless, and evil-free; the guilt lies within our souls, the sin lies within our consciousness, and the evil lies within our thoughts. Or, to put it another way, the guilt lies within our history, the sin within our culture, and the evil within our reality."

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