

REVISITING W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Coordinator: Mary Semel

W. Somerset Maugham was an extremely successful and popular twentieth century writer. He is acknowledged to be a master storyteller with a profound understanding of human nature and tolerance for its shortcomings. Through his complex characters, Maugham explores the search for love and meaning in life, often incorporating his fascination with exotic locales and cultures. Although not highly regarded by his peers, his work consistently outsold that of Conrad, James, Kipling and Galsworthy. In this study group, we read and discuss two novels, *The Painted Veil* and *The Razor's Edge*, and several short stories. The coordinator supplements the reading with biographical and historical information on Maugham's long, interesting, but not so happy life. We consider why Maugham's work endures and whether his self-assessment that he belongs "in the very front row of the second rate" is accurate.

(This is a repeat of a spring 2022 study group.)

Mary Semel is a social worker who recently retired from her psychotherapy practice. She was an English major in college. Her lifelong fascination with peoples' stories is reflected both in her profession and her love of literature, especially 19th and 20th-century novels. Mary has previously coordinated a section of the Narrative Non-fiction study group and a Maugham study group.

Type of Study Group: Reading and discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Novels: *The Painted Veil* and *The Razor's Edge*;

Short Stories: "Rain" and "De Amicitia".

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

WEEK 1

TOPIC: *The Painted Veil*

READING:

Preface through Section 43 (approximately 120 pp.)

QUESTIONS:

The story begins dramatically with the lovers in bed and the doorknob turning. What tone does this set for the story?
What do we know about Walter and Kitty when they marry?
What is colonial Hong Kong like? How are the characters of Walter and Charlie revealed when Walter announces his plan to go to Mei-tan-fu?

WEEK 2**TOPIC:** *The Painted Veil***READING:** Section 44 to end (approximately 122 pp.)**QUESTIONS:**

How do the nuns, Waddington, the Chinese orphans and the Manchu woman influence Kitty? Do you think she changes?
Kitty implores Walter to be friends and move past the infidelity. What prevents him from doing so?
What do you think is the cause of Walter's death? Suicide? Accident? Broken heart?
How do you explain Kitty's "relapse" with Charlie?
Do you see Maugham as sympathetic or critical of Kitty? Walter?

WEEK 3**TOPIC:** *The Razor's Edge***READING:** Chapters 1-2 (approximately 78 pp.)**QUESTIONS:**

Maugham introduces the major characters: who are they and what are your impressions of them? What is the "script" for Isabel and Larry? What is Larry's part and why isn't he playing it? What does Isabel mean when she says she isn't playing "the star" part?

WEEK 4: *The Razor's Edge***WEEK 5:** *The Razor's Edge***WEEK 6:** "Rain" and "De Amicitia"

