

Death, Disease and Disillusionment: Logotherapy and Survival Motivation in Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil*

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Abstract

Pandemics have been known to change the course of history. Pandemics in literature reflect on human behaviour, vulnerability, fear of the disease and death amongst the people. With healthcare systems collapsing, loved ones suffering and dying there is a general sense of dread and depression leading to cynicism and anxiety.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl recounts his experiences in the Nazi concentration camps and his survival story. He used his own theory, logotherapy, to discover how hope can be found in the midst of suffering and death. Logotherapy, which translates literally "to heal through meaning", is both a philosophy for living and a method employed in psychotherapy and counselling. Logotherapy means "a will to meaning in life"; finding a meaning in life which helps us to have something to live for.

This paper endeavours to study William Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil* in the light of Frankl's logotherapy. This paper offers insight into the situations of the characters and applies logotherapy as the pivot of hope during the epidemic and debates how finding a meaning and purpose in life provides motivation and an anchor to survival.

Keywords: Pandemic, Logotherapy, Viktor Frankl, Somerset Maugham, The Painted Veil, Survival motivation, Will to meaning.

...is there any sense in asking what is the meaning of life?

-Maugham, 9

He who has a way to live can bear with almost any how.

-Frankl, 9

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Viktor Frankl was an Austrian Psychiatrist and neurologist who founded the theory of Logotherapy – a meaning-centred approach to psychotherapy. In contrast to Freud's "will to pleasure" and Adler's "will to power," logotherapy is based on the idea that we are driven by a "will to meaning" or an inner desire to find purpose and meaning in life. (Ameli and Dattilio 387)

What keeps us going despite suffering and pain? How to overcome disillusionment and despair? According to Frankl, every person has a “will to meaning” in their life. They just have to look for that will and find their purpose in life and hold onto it. In the bestial concentration camps Frankl had nothing to hold onto. His entire family – father, mother, brother and wife were killed in some camp or the other. Only his sister survived. How did he - who had lost every human and material possession – find a reason to live? It was here that he used his theory of Logotherapy to survive:

...to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a purpose in life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and in dying. But no man can tell another what this purpose is. Each must find out for himself, and must accept the responsibility that his answer prescribes. If he succeeds, he will continue to grow in spite of all indignities. (Frankl 9)

The Painted Veil was published in 1925. It is the story of Kitty Garstin and her ill-fated marriage to bacteriologist Walter Fane, and thus it describes her growth as a human being. Kitty marries the wrong man for the wrong reasons. Her mother’s pressure for marriage and dreading her plain-looking and unattractive younger sister getting into wedlock before her forces her to marry Walter Fane, a bacteriologist, who is passionately in love with her. However, after moving to Hong Kong with her husband, she falls in love with the charming and handsome Charles Townsend, the Assistant Colonial Secretary. When Walter Fane discovers his wife’s infidelity he gives her a choice – either accompany him to Mei-Tan-Fu, a village beset by the cholera epidemic or submit to a public and socially humiliating divorce. While Townsend refuses to leave his wife and marry Kitty, she is left with no choice but to follow her husband to what she considers certain death. While in Mei-Tan-Fu, Kitty discovers that she is pregnant. She starts to help the nuns at the convent and busies herself while Walter stays out the whole day treating patients. Eventually, Walter contracts the disease and succumbs to it and Kitty returns to her parents’ home.

Kitty knows that her husband's intention is to let her die of the epidemic. The time that she spends alone surrounded by death and disease coupled with the jolt that she has received with Townsend's outright rejection of her makes her reconsider her life. *The Painted Veil* is about sin and suffering, service and sacrifice, repentance and regeneration. Opposing notions, such as the beautiful and the grotesque are juxtaposed. It reflects the antithetical nature of human relationships and captures the fine line between love and hate, passion and anger. In Maugham's world basic human emotions are twinned in the hearts of men and women and they never follow a mathematical and proportionate method of acting and reacting. In *The Painted Veil* human beings become victims of their own illusions.

Walter Fane, previously considered a cowardly and meek bacteriologist, is content with his life. He is married to the woman he loves and his work provides him with the satisfaction in life. Overall, his life has a purpose – love and work. His personal and professional lives are both to his liking, but when his dream existence is shattered by his wife's infidelity, he loses track of his life's purpose and meaning. His entire world comes crashing down. He is unable to find a reasonable purpose in life when he goes to the cholera ridden village Mei-Tan-Fu because his real intention is to punish Kitty by letting her die due to the epidemic. He hopes the same for himself. Viktor Frankl writes:

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation... we are challenged to change ourselves (104).

Walter is not able "to change" himself according to the need of the hour and circumstances. His "personal tragedy" does not lie just in being betrayed by his wife but in being unable to cope with

the betrayal. While in Mei-Tan-Fu, he performs his duties devotedly but his inner self is dead. He has “no will to live” and “no will to meaning” – it is all lost with his loss of faith in Kitty. It isn’t the epidemic that kills him. It is his lack of determination and lack of a reason to live that takes his life. His last words before his death are “The dog it was that died”. This is the last line from Oliver Goldsmith’s poem “An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog”. The poem is about selfishness and how it is manifested in people’s actions in society. Its main message is a critique of society, telling a story about betrayal and shallowness. At the beginning of the poem, one learns that the dog and the man are friends, but when the dog bites the man, people start to think that the dog has gone mad. They are all convinced that the man will die, and are shocked when it turns out to be the dog that unexpectedly dies instead.

Walter chooses to call himself the dog here and Kitty the man. He means that Kitty’s unfaithfulness was so poisonous that it killed him despite the fact that he had intended death for Kitty. Like the dog he had bitten Kitty so that she would ultimately lose her life to cholera. But the poison which she spread through Walter because of her infidelity spread to his soul and he wasted away in the end. People consider it madness when he takes her along to an epidemic ridden region. “She might have easily lost her life: he had. Was it a joke?” (Maugham, *The Painted Veil*). They all fear for her life, but she is the one who survives because she finds “a life-purpose” which gives her the will to survive.

Also, as compared to Walter, her intentions are never evil. She falls in love with someone else and commits adultery. But her intentions are never as cruel and evil as those of Walter who wants her to die. He wants to punish her physically and mentally. Outwardly, a well-respected and highly regarded doctor, inwardly, he is almost possessed by the devil at this juncture. He is a person of extremes – either quiet and loving to insanity or vengeful and hateful to the extent to turning into a murderer.

Kitty, on the other hand, turns out to be a balanced person out of the two. She quickly learns from her actions and begins to introspect. She is young and inexperienced, someone who grew up in a society where women were viewed as prospective brides, wives, mothers or daughters. Education and sophistication were never given any importance and she was raised by her mother with the sole ambition of finding a suitable husband for her. Her mother was herself disappointed in her husband, who according to her did not get enough promotions and was a social embarrassment to her. Kitty, being the beauty of family, pays the price of her mother's misplaced ambitions and expectations.

She has no freedom of choice in her life. She marries Walter Fane out of compulsion and later on is forced to move to a death-hole. All her life she is fettered by the desires of others and if she ever dares to follow her heart she is labelled as unfaithful and punished. After Walter's death Kitty suddenly finds herself free.

Freedom! That was the thought that sung in her heart so that even though the future was so dim, it was iridescent like the mist over the river where the morning sun fell upon it. Freedom! Not only freedom from a bond that irked, and a companionship which depressed her; freedom, not only from the death which had threatened, but freedom from the love that had degraded her; freedom from all spiritual ties, the freedom of a disembodied spirit; and with freedom, courage and a valiant unconcern for whatever was to come (Maugham).

Finally, it is in Mei-Tan-Fu, broken-hearted at Townsend's rejection and jolted to reality that she decides to change. This change is brought about in her because she decides to live life on her own terms, for herself and no one else. She discovers herself while working with the nuns at the convent. When she finds out about her pregnancy, it becomes the turning point in her life. Though she has the chance to retrieve her lost life with Walter by telling him that he is the father of the child, yet she chooses not to lie. When asked by Walter she says that doesn't know. This is a sign

of a strong and honourable character. While Walter is scheming and burning inside Kitty lays all her inner demons to rest.

Kitty begins to change when she starts to work with the nuns, taking care of the orphans. She realises that there is more in life than going to parties and having a great time. She begins to love the feeling of being needed. She changes not merely by her association with the nuns but because of her encounter with death; seeing people die everywhere of cholera. Face to face with death for the first time in her life, she becomes aware of the insignificance and triviality of life. She, who used to think that “painted veil” of life was the only reality has now the veil rudely lifted up before her gaze. Fear begins to purify her character. She works hard to change her old habits and ways. The impact of death and disease gives Kitty a new knowledge; it helps her have a better understanding of life and its meaning because “the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at any given moment.” (Frankl 102) She helps in the convent because she wants to help the people and not because of any ulterior motives. Kitty matures through various stages in life - marriage, love, adultery, indifference, suffering and regeneration and finally becomes a beautiful human being:

Kitty had a queer feeling that she was growing. The constant occupation distracted her mind and the glimpses she had of other lives and other outlooks awakened her imagination. She began to regain her spirits; she felt better and stronger... It began to seem quite natural to live in the midst of a terrible epidemic. She knew that people were dying to the right and left of her, but she ceased very much to think of it (Maugham).

With her pregnancy she finds another purpose in life – to raise a responsible and better child than her mother raised her to be. She wants to make sure that her child does not make the same mistakes

which she made in her life and decides to give her child the freedom to live. While talking to her father she says:

I want a girl because I want to bring her up so that she shan't make the mistakes I've made. When I look back upon the girl, I was I hate myself. But I never had a chance. I am going to bring up my daughter so that she's free and can stand on her own feet. I'm not going to bring a child into the world, and love her, and bring her up, just so that some man may want to sleep with her so much that he's willing to provide her with board and lodging for the rest of her life (Maugham).

Kitty's submission to Townsend after her return to Hong Kong, appears artificial in the beginning. But a vehement indulgence and subsequent negation are very much need for her purification and liberation. This episode between her and Townsend proves to be the ultimate soul-wrenching revelation to her. She, who had believed herself to be free of all feelings for the man, submits to him without much resistance. The self-loathing which she experiences subsequently brings about the most remarkable shift in her character. It is at this juncture that she feels like a cheat not just to her own self but to Townsend's wife who has been extremely good to her:

I don't feel human. I feel like an animal. A pig or a rabbit or a dog. Oh, I don't blame you, I was just as bad. I yielded to you because I wanted you. But it wasn't the real me. I'm not that hateful, beastly, lustful woman. I disown her. It wasn't me that lay on that bed panting for you when my husband was hardly cold in his grave and your wife had been so kind to me, so indescribably kind. It was only the animal in me, dark and fearful like an evil spirit, and I disown, and hate, and despise it. And ever since, when I've thought of it, my gorge rises and I feel that I must vomit (Maugham).

The title of the novel *The Painted Veil* is taken from P.B. Shelley's sonnet "Lift Not the Painted Veil". "Lift not the painted veil which those who live Call Life: ...a Spirit that strove For truth, like the Preacher found it not." (Shelley) Shelley's biographer, Newman Ivey White, points out that

'Veils 'is almost always with Shelley a symbol of the concealment of truth. (White, 331) The symbolism of the veil is used by Shelley in another of his poems *Prometheus Unbound*, "Death is the veil which those who live call life." Life is made of illusions and people's ideas of reality, truth and death are all veiled.

Though the novel reflects the ambivalence of the poem it is magnanimous towards life and a great deal less obscure. According to Frankl, life is all about one's perspective. When the "veil" is lifted the bitter truth and reality is revealed and it is this bitter truth that the characters of the novel have to deal with. Each one deals with it in his or her own way and it is only Kitty who manages to emerge as a better and improved version of her older self while Walter's baser characteristics take control of his psyche and reduce him to the worst version of his older self. According to Frankl, every situation in life is like a problem or a challenge and man can solve these problems by being responsible and that is the very essence of human existence. (102) In the end Kitty succeeds in finding "a meaning in life" which serves as an anchor for her survival through her suffering – both emotional and physical. But as Frankl believes, it is not necessary to suffer to find meaning in life, he simply tells us through his experience and Logotherapy that "meaning is possible even in spite of suffering." (105) In the end we can say Kitty is able to "live" a meaningful and fulfilling life through experiences which help her grow as a human being.

She has found wholeness within herself and united the material life within the spiritual by allowing it to transform the material that yet remains the same; ... And the moral import of that is, that it is not necessary to die to attain the Kingdom of Heaven but necessary only to live (Ward 247).

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