

# *Analysis of Feminist in the Seventh Sin*

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**Abstract:** *The Seventh Sin* is the second adaptation of *The Painted Veil* written by W. Somerset Maugham, and this paper exploits Kate Millet's sexual politics theory to analyze subtle variations of power relationships in the protagonist Carol's marriage, which supplies a new perspective of understanding Maugham's *The Painted Veil* and *The Seventh Sin*.

## 1. Introduction

*The Seventh Sin* is a 1957 drama film, distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and directed by Ronald Neame. The film is adapted from the novel *The Painted Veil* written by W. Somerset Maugham. Compared with another two adaptations of 1934 and 2006, *The Seventh Sin* received rather less attention and concern, partly owing to its box-office failure. However, against the backdrop of nowadays COVID-19 pandemic, *The Painted Veil*, as a significant novel describing people in the face of a serious epidemic, regains people's interest and obtains a new tide of re-analysis and re-understanding. *The Seventh Sin* is consequently brought back to the public's view.

The film is set in China after World War II, and the story begins: Carol, who was in a repressed marriage relationship, had a secret affair with a married man, Paul. Her biologist husband, Walter, discovered this and gave her a choice: go with him to the remote mainland village to fight against a cholera epidemic or shamefully face a public divorce scandal. After fruitless efforts, Carol thinks her only option is to accompany Walter to the village, where she meets Tim, the bohemian, alcoholic and local consul. He soon introduces her to the nuns at the local hospital convent, and Carol begins to reassess her selfish and egoist life and character in the past. Carol happens to learn that she is pregnant at her work. She told Walter she wasn't sure who the father was, and he regretted her infidelity. Soon after, Walter contracted cholera and died. The film ends with a scene in which Carol and her unborn child are going to return to Hong Kong[1-2].

## 2. Materials and Methods

"Sexual politics" is a key term raised by Kate Millet who plays a leading role in the second-wave movement. Millet tries to enrich the concept of politics by borrowing power theory and defining it as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (2016: 24). Millet sensitively observes that the relationship between sexes, throughout history, is an essentially political one which involves the overall control and oppression of one group towards the other group, which has already been decided and defined by their birth. To be more exact, Millet sees it as a sexual relationship of dominance and subordinate between men and

women, while the dominators are males and the dominated are females since it is a patriarchal society where every place of power within is in males' hands. Based on that, Millet hence develops and establishes the theory of sexual politics through discussions and analyses respectively from the perspectives of ideology, biology, sociology, class, economy, education, anthropology, and psychology.

Millet's theory of sexual politics can be summarized in the following three points. Firstly, the sexual relationship between males and females is ideologically established and founded, which displays an approval of male superiority and masculinity and a contempt for females and femininity, rather than on biological facts. With the universal agreement of male superiority, men are easier to get more education, earn more money, seize more power, and enter into higher classes than women, which, to a further extent, enlarges the huge gap between them and strengthens, in turn, people's unconscious recognition of male superiority. Secondly, family is the chief patriarchal institution where males and females are encouraged to perform their masculinity and femininity respectively, generally through the legal, economic, and sexual dominance of the husband over his wife. By then, male superiority further consolidates itself. Thirdly, males legitimate their forces and exploit them to have a legal dominance of women's body autonomy which explains why women are facing much more serious punishment for adultery than men. Rape, a violent force of special sexual characteristics, represents the emotional outbreaks of hatred, aggression, and the desire to violate personality. They start to regard women as enemies to be conquered to a certain degree. What's more, out of male hostility, women are portrayed as an omen of disasters or impurity, like Pandora or Eve, who commits original sins and brings with them catastrophes. "The connection of woman, sex and sin constitutes the fundamental pattern of western patriarchal thought thereafter" (2016: 54)

In this paper, *The Seventh Sin* is taken as the research object and TPV as the reference. The first part of the paper introduces the film information of *The Seventh Sin*, summarizes plots. The second part exploits sexual politics and touches upon the core concept of "original sin" to analyze subtle changes in sexual relationship within Carol's marriage to Walter based on textual analysis and observe how Carol becomes a sinner, which will be divided into three parts: the exposed Carol's affair, Carol and Walter in Mei-tan-fu, Carol's pregnancy, primarily according to the plot-line. The third part reflects on Carol's process to be subjugated by Walter and the patriarchal society and concludes the paper. In a word, the paper tries to adopt the theory of sexual politics to uncover subtle variations of power relationships in the protagonists' marriage through the case study of *The Seventh Sin*.

## 2.1. Background of the study area

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the research on *The Painted Veil* (TPV for short) was focused mainly on the elements of the East, Orientalism, and imperialism, which were based on an exploration of Maugham's writing style and oriental themes. Philip Holden (1994) studies Maugham's oriental writing in the novel, focusing on "an area of whiteness" he creates. Philip holds that Maugham's adoption of Chinese philosophical thinking, especially Taoism, helps him rid of binarisms and creates a vast play of diverse signs, yet Maugham still fails to jump out of stereotyped writing of orientalism. Philip Holden (1996) contends that Maugham, on account of his homosexual self-identification, communicates imperial ideology through orienting nation and masculinity[3-6].

Owing to the outbreak of the pandemic, the research focus has switched to re-examination and re-reflection of Chinese images, racial stigmatization, and white supremacy hidden in the text, meanwhile, its elements of plague have gradually become a key concern of scholars. Lei Zhang (2020) focuses on the construction of the Chinese image of Western centralism and argues that

Maugham remains his national superiority and prejudice in TPV, and presents archetypal characteristics of Western literature in constructing Chinese images. Feng Mei (2020) studies the image of the Manchu lady in TPV and tries to explore the profound connotation and cultural meaning from the imagological approach. She finds the Manchu lady, in TPV, significantly plays as an incarnation of the remote and exotic East. The attitude towards her symbolizes Western people's attitude towards the East: they gaze at her beauty at a distance but refuse to get closer and keep her mysterious, moreover, they keep the prejudice towards the East to keep the so-called "purity" of the East.

Some research also goes into film adaptations, which chiefly focuses on the 2006 version. Qijun Han (2020) analyzes interpersonal distrust and the re-establishment of trust in Walter, and the people around him through the 2006 version. Irina Stanova makes a close reading of the novel and three adaptations (1934, 1957, 2006), and examines Chinese resilience in the confrontation against epidemic from individual perspectives, scientific and religious, oriental and occidental perspectives.

### 3. Textual analysis

#### 3.1. The exposed affair

The movie starts with a metaphorical shot of a wedding doll on the dressing table, with romantic music filling the air, then the camera slowly switches to a dress, underwear, stockings, and high-heeled shoes scattered on the chair and ground, which seems to be taken off in a hurry. The camera moves uplift to a male suit and then stops suddenly at a focus on the door, with the sound of turning a door handle. The female protagonist Carol Carwin fearfully bounces up in the center of the camera and nervously stares at the door handle. And then a male sound (from her lover Paul Duvelle) appear to ask who is there. The someone outdoors gradually stops his movement. Carol jumps off the bed in haste and tidies herself.

The shot movement above throws the audience romantically into a love fantasy towards the movie with some typically sexual hints, especially from a peeping perspective of camera movement, while the fantasy was shut up suddenly with a breaking sound on the door handle. Audiences are also thrown out of the fantasy unexpectedly and they may start to sense something abnormal from Carol's hasty behavior. Some implicit predictions appear in the mind's eye of the audience: Carol may spend her time with another man, who is not her husband. She may have an affair with someone, and that's why she becomes so upset. The predictions are proven with the proceeding of the movie. Audiences feel guilty for their precedent visual pleasure for it is immoral and therefore have a negative and hostile impression of Carol for her infidelity to her husband. In the meantime, the audience themselves, together with Carol, unconsciously feel afraid for the person outdoors, since they all have enjoyed some immoral pleasure just now, which leads to their unconscious recognition of Walter's authority later.

Take the film name "The Seventh Sin" into further consideration. It is then not complicated to sense director and scriptwriter's arrangements are not a coincidence. The seventh sin alludes to the seven original sins of Christianity which contain lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride. The order of sins is verified by different definitions by scholars, therefore audience is hard to predict what the seventh sin accurately is. However, through the above several shots, they know what it refers to. On this basis, the hint from the title, an allusion to religion, is easier to activate the audience's religious thinking and moral judgment, and quickly form a prejudice towards Carol.

It is worth noting that the scriptwriter deliberately adjusts the order of the narrative for creating dramatic conflicts, by postponing telling relevant information about Carol, Walter, and their marriage which Maugham chooses to tell his reader at the very beginning. Carol is a social butterfly who indulges herself in merry-making denies her best age for marriage. The reason that she chooses

to marry a reserved and rigid doctor is to escape from the pressure from her parents, the envy of her sister's happy marriage, and the worry of passing youth. Her marriage to Walter is more like a collaboration, less a marriage itself. Equipped with the background information, readers may have a more objective view of Carol's affair. If she holds no love for her husband and both of them know their marriage is an illusion from the very start, her sin of adultery can hardly stand, in other words, the degree of her guilt would be cut off by half. It is hence clear to find that the scriptwriter is consciously molding Carol into a woman of committing original sins through purposeful stigmatization[7-9].

As the movie goes on, the audience gets to know Walter is the one who stands outdoors and discovers Carol's affair. In this sense, he is a victim while Carol is a traitor. Out of a sense of guilt, his hesitation and silence facing Carol, in the eyes of Carol and the audience, becomes a fair punishment for her adultery. And this exactly is the effect that the scriptwriter wants to achieve. Walter thereby becomes a judge, standing on the moral high ground and looking down on Carol in invisible majesty. A group of shots, which frame both Walter and Carol in the camera, is worth further observation, since the composition of the pictures shares common characteristics, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The identical composition of scenes when Carol and Walter stay together.

The above four snapshots are mainly clipped from two scenes when they implicitly talk about their marriage situations over the affair. They present astonishing common features. They stand detached from each other, respectively occupying the two halves of the picture, moreover, Walter generally stands closer to the camera, plus his massive figure, which becomes an absolute center in the audience's view. Meanwhile, they standing or sitting together, yet they have no eye contact. Carol is staring at Walter, while he just looks away and his eyes are always fixed on other places, as if she doesn't exist at all, which improves Walter's male authority by the contempt for Carol. The arrangement of the position and framing, through focusing on Walter's silence and detaching from Carol, actually obscurely enhances Walter's power and further lowers Carol's status.

Soon after, Walter tells Carol that he will take over a doctor's work at a cholera-ridden Chinese village named Mei-tan-fu and suggests that if she does not join him there, he will file for divorce which will bring a horrible scandal. Infuriated that she is being infected with cholera and dying in the countryside, Carol denounces their marriage in anger. Walter reminds Carol of her affair and accuses of Carol's envy and selfishness. When Carol begs Walter for fulfilling her love for Paul, Walter seems to have foreseen the situation. With little consideration, he gives her a test. If Paul will divorce his wife and marry Carol within a week, he agrees to divorce Carol quietly. Carol immediately visits Paul at his office to tell him the proposal, but Paul refuses to abandon his wife

and children for her. Carol is at a total loss and has no other choice but only accompanying Walter to the distant village. As soon as Returning home, the defeated Carol finds that Walter who has anticipated Paul's rejection, and already ordered the servants to pack her luggage.

Walter's predictive judgment again convinces the audience of his "male divinity", in turn, Carol's wrong decision further deepens her guilt and emptiness in the audience's view. Till now, their relationship in the first stage has been established. Walter is both a victim and a judge, which means he has definite power to judge Carol's guilt, moreover, he has a stronger control of life and the world than Carol, and hence consolidate his authority in their relationship, and Carol is accordingly put on the tag "sinner" and becomes the accused, waiting for further punishment and re-integration by Walter and the patriarchy society. Just like the doll appeared in the beginning, she has no inborn power to achieve herself and has to accept the stigmatization in a fruitless revolt.

### 3.2. Carol and Walter in Mei-tan-fu

Edward Said (2003: 1-4) contends that the West, out of chauvinism and imperialism, takes itself as the Self, and assumes a concept of the Oriental, as the other. They dress up the Oriental according to their imagination and demands rather than having a true understanding of it. In a word, their watch at the Oriental is just a way to realize the Self and satisfy themselves. Mei-tan-fu is such a typical product of the oriental imagination. The place, infected with cholera, is desolate and is a place of the dead, and people within were poor, unenlightened, and uncultured who are eagerly waiting for "the Savior" from Western to rescue them.

Taking the sexual relationship between Walter and Carol into observation, Walter typically plays a leading role as the savior who brings advanced medical knowledge and technology, while Carol becomes rescued since she lacks education and abilities. Therefore, she has relied on Walter, or else, she has no choice but to die. Set in the cholera-stricken space, Walter's identity itself endows him with a privilege that gives the utmost authority, however, Carol completely loses her little independence. In this sense, Carol and Mei-tan-fu identically play as the Other and eventually yields to the definite power of Walter and the Self. The delicate arrangement of the place makes the male-centered perspective of narration show the cloven foot again.

Another male character deserves further exploration, Tim Waddington, a bohemian, alcoholic consul who plays Carol's male mentor in Mei-tan-fu. Tim keeps Carol company and guides her to see real Chinese people's life, meanwhile, he senses detachment between Carol and Walter and tries to bridge the gap. He tells Carol that her husband's tireless efforts inoculating the villagers have won him respect and mentions that Walter received a wound since a patient attacked him out of fear. Carol is also told that Paul's various affairs with many women. And Tim then insinuates that Carol's ignorance of her husband's honor and wound, their sleeping in separate bedrooms, and their detachment proves that their marriage is a failure. Carol drives Tim away in hybrid emotions of rage and shame, but she starts to oscillate her belief and changes her opinions on Walter little by little. Tim therefore can be seen as an incarnation of the patriarchal society which intends to maintain the patriarchal marriage relationship and consolidate itself by persuading women to be submissive and worship their husbands.

Carol's fluctuation made her do a sincere apology to Walter when he comes back at night and offers him sandwiches "without lettuce" to show goodwill for peace-making, although the action infuriates Walter instead. And then Walter angrily reminds Carol of her infidelity and contends not to forgive her guilt. Walter then rapes her, which can be a desire to violate Carol's personality to completely conquer and subjugate her both physically and spiritually.

Apart from fixing Carol's broken marriage relationship, Tim guides Carol to the local convent and introduces her to the Mother Superior. She wants to work in the convent to kill off her idle time

at home after she sees children and other independent women there. Simone de Beauvoir (2011: 726-727) points out that religion, as a product of male superiority, surrenders women through a promise of nihilism and nothingness, which controls women's spirits and subjugate them under the frame of a patriarchal society.



Figure 2: Carol is introduced to Mother Superior by Tim.

Therefore, what implies in the Figure 2. which is metaphorically meaningful. Under the guidance of Tim, a representative of patriarchal society, Carol is brought to a religious place for rid of her incapacity and inability, while she just walks from her male mentor to another patriarchal place. She is, after all, enshrouded in the shroud of the male-centered power system. At the same time, she does not get the chance to work in the convent for Mother refuses her for her inability to do anything until she successfully begs Walter to intervene and convince Mother Superior. In other words, what Carol begs for males is essentially working for males themselves. The male mentor and religion work as a form of discipline, which discipline Carol into a total agreement towards patriarchal systems gently and invisibly. The discipline effect is clear and thorough.

In this part, Walter strengthens his definite “divine power” by becoming a savior and a leader in the face of the Oriental and his wife, meanwhile, his knowledge and advanced technology endow him with authority, which is exactly Carol's shortage. She thereby can only be dependent on her husband, her mentor, and religious work, which oscillates her thoughts of rebellion, making her a follower and an obedient worker under the frame of patriarchal society, yet her sin doesn't be forgiven by Walter, on the contrary, she has been always reminded of her mistakes by Walter's frigidness and force.

### 3.3. The exposed affair

Several days go by and Carol gets more skilled and proficient in the convent, at this time, she suddenly finds that she is pregnant, while it is not clear who is the father, Paul or Walter. She has submitted to her husband now, therefore she tells her pregnancy to Walter and expresses her will to live with him. Sarcastically, Walter still keeps his frigidness and ambiguity with detachment. She then confesses it to the Mother Superior, who advises her to seek her path and wait for her husband's forgiveness.

The pregnancy is a deepened sin at the highest degree Since Carol has an affair with Paul, which makes the father uncertain. As long as she can not prove the child's father is Walter sufficiently, Carol will be nailed to a moral cross and accept the cruelest punishment for good. Although the pregnancy is just possibly the aftermath of her guilt, Walter cannot truly forgive her for he cannot make a complete possession of Carol, as the child will suggest a shameful past of adultery. In this

sense, Carol's pregnancy eliminates her hope of reconciling with Walter.

Soon after, Carol is urgently escorted to the hospital by soldiers one night, where she finds Walter lying painfully and suffering from the infection of cholera. As Carol begs him to forgive her, she calls him: "Walter! Walter! Darling!" Walter weakly murmurs "the dog it was that died" and then dies. The changes of call present Carol's inner world. She has entirely given up her oscillation and knelt towards Walter's authority. Therefore, the death of Walter makes him a sacrifice, in the meantime, a male god, while Carol, who stays alive, becomes his loyal believer, and will never run from the blame for her guilt in her life. She will never get a chance to hear Walter say "I forgive you". She becomes a true sinner for good.

It is worth noting to hear Mother Superior's interpretation of Walter's last words. She comforts Carol that her husband died in peace with a gentle explanation that comes from a poem by Oliver Goldsmith, which tells a story that a dog bit his owner to hurt him. Instead of the man dying, the dog died of guilt for harming the man he loved. It can be seen as a comfort to the audience, which further strengthens the great image of Walter who chooses to forgive her wife's guilt. However, is the dog die of the remorse of harm? The dog is poisoned to death by the poisonous blood of the man. It is a curse said to Carol for his accusations and reproaches. It is another deep metaphor hidden in the text.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper examines the sexual relationships between Carol and Walter based on the sexual politics theory of Kate Millet, who appeals that women are under oppression by men. This paper finds the hidden relationships between the couple undergo three periods that encompass judge and the accused (victim and sinner), leader and follower (savior and the rescued), and god and believer (god and the sinner for good). It is clear to see Carol's rebellion, oscillation, and subjugation under the discipline of the patriarchal society, which obliges her to voluntarily admit her so-called "original sin" and becomes a true sinner.

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