

"Girl With a Pearl Earring" – Tracy Chevalier
Tracy Chevalier is unusual in having taken a specific painting
and created a construction around it. How does she build a
convincing impression of the characters and their
circumstances in this unusual household on Papists Corner
in Delft between 1664 – 1676?

The novel "Girl with a Pearl Earring" is based around Vermeer's painting of the same name. Griet is a young girl sent to be a maid when her father, a tile painter, is put out of work. The novel follows her for two years while she works at the house and when she returns to her place of work ten years later. The novel is written from her viewpoint.

The novel is set in Delft in 1664. The setting of a novel is very important. If a novel is set in a real place and the details are not correct, then anyone who has been there will notice the faults and the read will not be as satisfying as it might be. A lot of real places in Delft are mentioned in the novel such as the Oude Langendijk, Molenport, Sciedam Gates, Rietveld Canal and Koe Gate. Chevalier does this mainly to give a realistic setting for the novel. She has evidently visited Delft to be able to give such detail on the layout of the streets, and also she might have looked at maps of the town.

The main meeting place in the town was the market place. The market gossip was the way most news got around Delft and was spread mainly by the women doing their shopping or selling things. Anything that happens in Delft would almost certainly be passed around in this way, including the fact that Griet was going to be painted by Vermeer even though Griet did not even really know herself. In addition, Griet was worried that details of her relationship with Pieter would be spread around Delft. The women were definitely the main town gossips and Griet knew just who will spread it best by manipulating her neighbour into thinking that she will not be in the painting, as she knows that everything she overhears will be repeated to the next person that she meets.

There are lots of Paintings either by Vermeer himself or by other painters of the Dutch school, whose paintings show views of Delft at the time which she will have studied to get the feel of the place. Reading material of the time (Census' or Wills).

There are two main religions in Delft: Catholicism and Protestantism. The Catholics were in a minority and although they were accepted, it was frowned on for them to demonstrate their religion in public.

"It was not that we avoided them but they kept themselves to the mselves. They were tolerated in Delft but expected not to parade their Faith openly."

This quote shows that Griet had never met any Catholics before she worked at Papists' Corner.

"I knew no Catholics. There were not so many in Delft and none in the shops we used."

And so Entering Vermeer's household was a bit of a shock for her. The Catholics lived in far more luxury than she ever had and there are crucifixion scenes that hung upon their walls when they never would in a Protestant household.

"On the wall directly opposite hung a painting that was larger than me. It was of Christ on the cross, surrounded by the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and St. John. I tried not to stare but I was amazed by its size and subject. 'Catholics are not so different from you and us' my father had said but we did not have such pictures in our houses or churches or anywhere."

She treats them and their house as totally alien as she has never known anything like it before. In particular the paintings and furnishings. There is a distinct difference between the grandeur of the Catholics house and the plainness of her Protestant lifestyle.

"I tried not to compare it with that of the household at Papists' Corner, but already I had become accustomed to meat and good rye bread. ...The brown bread was dry and the vegetable stew was plain with no fat to flavour it. ...Everything was simple

and clean without ornamentation. I loved it because I knew it, but I was aware now of its dullness.”

Guilds were an important part of an artisan's life in Delft. All fully trained Artist's, glassmakers, Tapestry makers, tailors etcetera had to be part of the guild Of St. Luke. It cost Three Guilders to join, which was about three days wages for a working craftsman of the time. The Guild gave a sort of 'pension' to members who had become injured or fallen upon hard times. Chevalier helps to bring the importance of guilds into the novel by making Griet's father need the help when he has an accident involving his kiln when he loses his eyesight. Also Vermeer was a Master Craftsman of the Guild of St. Luke. It helped Chevalier to tie the story together and gave a reason for Griet to go and work with Vermeer. He takes pity on Griet's family and accepts her as a maid for his wife Catherina.

Delft tiles are also an important part of the surroundings in Delft.

They are in a lot of Vermeer's paintings (Vermeer's paintings were often set in one room in his house, the tiles around the floor were often used to cover rising damp - It could be suggesting that there could have been some in Vermeer's house) and they were also the main trade of Delft and an important feature of the book as Chevalier made Griet's father a tile painter and Delft tiles were the reason that Griet had to become a maid in the first place.

There is a noticeable build up of tension in the household and Catherina is one of the main causes of the bad feeling between members of the household. Catherina had never liked Griet and tried to put her down from the moment that they met.

“Well she's not very big, is she strong enough?”

Catherina's first words about Griet is quite a cutting remark. The relationship between the two does not improve as the book progresses. Catherina does not like it that Griet tends to look up to Maria Thins rather than herself.

“I looked at Maria Thins which made Catherina angrier 'I have said no' she announced 'It is I who decide what you can and cannot do. Have you forgotten that ?'”

It is just rather uncomfortable at the beginning but by a little way through it has gained a more edgy and much less friendly tone. By the end of the novel there is hatred between the two. It does not appear that Griet hates Catherina and speaks of her in rather a pitying tone that suggests she doesn't really mind one way or the other if she is liked by Catherina. Griet is more worried about her reputation in Delft going down because of Vermeer.

Maria Thins doesn't really help matters much. She is friendly but she spends her time sorting out the finances and trying to get her son -in-law to paint a bit faster. She is sympathetic to Griet and approves of her as she appears to be making an improvement in Vermeer's paintings. She helps to cover up that Griet is helping Vermeer as she knows Catherina would not like it and Maria thinks it is for the best. Maria Thins knows all there is to know about the household and it's goings on. She is scarier than Catherina but in a less sinister way.

Cornelia goes out of her way to cause trouble for Griet. Cornelia has a very similar temperament to her mother and is difficult to Griet for that reason. She plays malicious tricks that are often very hurtful to Griet emotionally. She has no respect for Griet's feelings and hurts Griet more than I think she in fact realises. On the first day that Griet arrives she is cocky to Griet and their relationship goes downhill after Griet slaps her. The first trick that Cornelia plays is when she goes into the cellar where Griet sleeps and fiddles with her things and breaks the tile that Griet's father gave to her when she first left to become a maid. She breaks the two figures apart Griet and says that “she would have hurt me less if she had broken the heads from the bodies” Cornelia did not realise how she had almost prophesied the future as it was soon after that Griet's brother Frans leaves the tile factory where he was apprenticed and worked in to go to Rotterdam. Another time she steals Griet's tortoiseshell Comb and replaces it with Catherina's in an attempt to frame her as a thief. Fortunately, Griet tells Maria Thins what has happened and the other comb is found as proof to her innocence. In the end, it is Cornelia who leads Catherina to the painting of Griet in the attic in an attempt to ruin Griet utterly. Instead she causes Catherina's pregnancy to go

English Coursework Essay

wrong and the baby dies after being delivered a month early. Cornelia is also really horrible about Agnes to Griet, when Agnes dies of the plague Cornelia asks if Griet would like a doll for her sister when she evidently knows that she has died and knows that it will upset Griet.

There is a large amount of sexual tension in the house at Papists' Corner between Vermeer, Pieter and Van Ruijven. They all have connections requited or not. Van Ruijven is showing Griet unwanted attention and Griet is very worried about ending up like the maid in the red dress in one of Vermeer's paintings. Luckily for Griet, Vermeer has his own masked feelings for her, but she is not quite sure what they are yet. Vermeer is not pleased about Pieter's intentions towards Griet either. She appears to be trapped between the two as she feels for both of them in different ways and only one could ever truly be hers. Pieter does not like the idea of her being in a painting but he is more worried about her and

Johannes Vermeer himself was the son of a tailor and became a master craftsman of the Guild of St. Luke in 1653 marrying Catherina in the same year. He changed religion from Protestant to Catholic when he married Catherina, as Catholics could not marry protestants. He died in 1675 leaving the family in huge amounts of debt. He never sped up his painting and only painted thirty-five paintings in his whole life.

Vermeer is the biggest cause of tension in the house. He keeps secrets from his wife and the rest of the family - the main one being that Griet helps him in his paintings. He sends her out to do things without telling the rest of the house, she risks her reputation for him, and her job is on the line. If Catherina finds out about her helping her husband, she would not have Griet in the house. Even Maria Thins knows that telling her own daughter this would not be the best thing and when she finds out she does not tell Catherina as she thinks that Griet is helping Vermeer to speed up his work. Vermeer does not like all the attention that Griet gets from Van Ruijven and Pieter and tries to divert it.

Griet never calls Vermeer only as he, him or master. This shows her awe of him and that their relationship was particularly uncomfortable.

Vermeer will not allow Catherina into the Studio as she is clumsy and he is worried that she will knock over the latest painting, or as she did once, break the Camera Obscura. Griet is definitely attracted to Vermeer and shows this with similes when she describes his voice as "walking along the edge of the canal and unsure of my steps"

His presence makes her very nervous and she is eager to please him. When he asks her questions and she does not know the right answer he gets annoyed easily. However, once she has got the idea he is happy to have someone else who shares his artistic eye and love of colour. He notices her artistic eye almost immediately when he first asks her about the vegetables in her kitchen. He asks Griet what colour the clouds are and she answers that they are white. Vermeer tells her this is wrong and shows her that there are lots of different ones. However he shows her little attention other than this and it makes Griet unhappy as all she wants is for him to be proud of her. He is selfish and never thinks of the consequences for Griet when he makes decisions, only the problems the might occur for himself. Griet herself thinks that she has a friend in Vermeer but she is not quite sure how. He is powerful in his way and strong in character. She said his voice was "Low and dark like the wood of the table I was working on".

He is also a bit of a perfectionist and after spending hours painting in a map on the painting of 'Woman with a Pearl Necklace' simply paints it out, as it is what the painting needs. He pays great attention to detail and every little thing in one of his paintings has to be right before he will admit it is finished. He is very slow and his paintings are painstakingly done. Vermeer knows nothing about Griet's social background and shows his ignorance on this when he talks to Griet about ivory combs to tidy her hair when Griet knows she could never be rich enough to own such an item. He acts in an almost reclusive way by locking himself into his studio and never taking an active role in the raising of his family and the running of the house, simply caring about his paintings. He does not waste words and is quite reflective, thoughtful and rarely in a hurry. He is kind when Griet's family are in quarantine and this means a lot to her.

The settings and characters are mapped out using Vermeer's paintings. Most of the Characters are in one painting or another some things are known about Vermeer and his

English Coursework Essay

family. Catherina is known but there are no paintings of her and Chevalier accounts for this by making Catherina clumsy and fidgety so Vermeer will not paint her.

The first painting Chevalier mentions in the novel is 'The Woman with the Pearl Necklace' He uses this to introduce Van Ruijven and his wife into the story. The first and only time we meet Van Ruijven's wife she seems like any normal upper class woman in that she holds the same belief that all maids will steal and so keeps the pearl necklace to leave with Vermeer.

The Milkmaid is one of Vermeer's most famous paintings and it is brought into the story as Chevalier tells us that the maid pouring milk is Tanneke. Tanneke is so proud to be in a painting and it is said that she stood happily pouring milk for hours while Vermeer painted her. These kind of details help to bring the story to life.

The next painting that is mentioned is 'The Baker's Daughter'. Chevalier shows us the reaction of Griet's father when he finds out that the Baker's Daughter was wearing her cap like Griet wore hers and not as most girls did as was the fashion. This made him a little worried and it is a good detail to use as it gives us a sense of her father's thoughts. Griet stands in for the baker's daughter at one point so that Vermeer could paint with a model there to get the shadows in the right places.

"One morning when I was cleaning he came in and asked me to stand in for the baker's daughter, who had taken ill and could not come 'I want to look for a moment' he explained 'Someone must stand there'".

The maid in the red dress becomes particularly important as there is a story behind it that Chevalier uses in the novel. The maid in the red dress had to pose with Van Ruijven and is given wine by him and by the end the maid in the red dress is pregnant with Van Ruijven's baby and disgraced. Chevalier makes this effect Griet as Van Ruijven has expressed an interest in having Vermeer paint her in a painting with her. Van Ruijven has been making unwanted advances towards Griet and Chevalier uses the true story about the painting to good effect when showing Griet's worry about what might happen to her and how she could avoid it. Chevalier also mentioned that that was the last time before the painting of Van Ruijven's wife where someone looked out of one of his paintings.

Van Ruijven's wife was in many of the paintings as Van Ruijven was his main patron and one of the only reasons that Vermeer did not go into debt before was because Van Ruijven paid him well for his paintings. Van Ruijven's wife was pictured writing a letter, playing a lute and putting a pearl necklace on. His daughters were painted in the painting called "The Concert".

Chevalier has given reasons in the story for why things are how they are in the paintings, for instance in "The Concert" Van Ruijven's back is towards the sight of the painting. Chevalier says this is because Van Ruijven is a poor musician and cannot hold his lute properly. This amuses Griet's father as it shows that however rich, you can still be a bad musician.

The most important however is "The Girl with the Pearl Earring" as this is of course, the basis of the whole story and all the tension in the house that I mentioned earlier comes down to this painting. Nothing is known about the subject and Chevalier took full advantage of this as she could make up the character without limitations. Everything is however in keeping with the area and time, her name for instance must have been Dutch, where she lived and how rich the area was then. If rich people had lived there it would have been less convincing to someone who knew the town.

The last thing that I think contributes to the plausibility of the book is of course the characters of the people in the book especially Griet. There are subtle details that provide an insight into her character. Some of her most distinctive attributes are that she has an artistic eye, she is curious and very much a perfectionist.

Chevalier shows Griet's artistic eye very early on in the novel by the way that she arranges the vegetables into a circle, so that they look good.

"I always laid vegetables out in a circle each with its own section like a slice of pie. There were five slices: Red Cabbage, Onions, Leeks, Carrots and Turnips. I had used a knife edge to shape each slice, and placed a carrot disk at the centre"

It is also shown that Griet's mother does not share her artistic eye as she simply tips the vegetables into the soup without even thinking about it. Griet winces as she watches all her hard work tipped away.

Griet is a perfectionist and everything has to be neat and precise. Her first comment about Catherina mentions her untidiness.

"The woman looked as if she had been blown about in the wind, although it was a calm day. Her cap was askew so that tiny blonde curls escaped and hung about her forehead like bees which she swatted at impatiently several times. Her collar needed straightening and was not as clean as it could be"

Another sign of her perfectionist nature is the way that she moves the cloth in the painting of the woman writing. She knows that the painting will be better with it. She even risks her job to make the composition of the painting right.

She is very respectful to Vermeer and takes great pride in the work that she does for him. She is loyal to her family but tries to defend Vermeer when her mother and father suggest that his paintings have a subtle Catholic element in them. Although they are totally different Griet still has feelings for Vermeer and will defend him if anyone, even her family think otherwise.

Vermeer appears to have a presence in Griet's mind. When he enters the room she can feel his presence before she sees or hears him.

She is very tactful to Tanneke and knows just how to get and keep friends she is especially good at buttering up Tanneke.

"So one of Delfts wealthiest men takes pleasure in looking at you each day'. Tanneke grinned, her pocked face growing even wider. The right words changed her mood in a moment. It was just up to me to find the words."

Another is:

"I was careful to deflect any praise for better housekeeping from myself. I did not want to make enemies. If Maria Thins liked the meal I suggested that it was Tanneke's cooking that made it so."

With her tact comes her skill of keeping things to herself only telling people things if she believes they need to know and not just for the sake of town gossip. Her decisive nature helps with this and after a couple of moments thought can decide what she should say and it is almost always the right thing. Sometimes however she is caught off guard with Maria Thins in particular.

"She's carrying a child again'

'Another?' I let slip. I was surprised that Catharina would want another child when they were so short of money.

Maria Thins frowned at me. 'Watch yourself, girl'

'I'm sorry madam' I instantly regretted even that one word. It was not my place to say how big their family should be. 'Has the doctor been?' I said trying to make amends."

Despite this kind of encounter between the two Maria Thins shows Griet a kind of respect in the above for instance she tells Griet about Catharina's pregnancy even though it is not commonly known yet.

Chevalier shows the decisive side of Griet in her writing when she uses short, one line paragraphs showing that Griet does not dwell on small things is decisive and moves on quickly.

The only subject on which we find her confused about and most definitely in decisive on is between Pieter and Vermeer. She knows Pieter is the one who really feels for her and that he is the better choice but she can't help but want him to be Vermeer instead. She constantly finds things wrong with Pieter while Vermeer can do no wrong. She is constantly complaining about Pieter's bloody fingernails other imperfections. He is a perfectly nice young man and even though she can see that he is good looking and will support her and her family well in the future she is very unsure about it, he could never measure up to Vermeer in Griet's eyes.

As I mentioned earlier Griet has a very artistic mind and another way that Chevalier shows this through her writing is when Griet uses similes to describe things and feelings. The

English Coursework Essay

similes that she uses are relevant to Griet like: "Hearing his voice made me feel like I was walking along the edge of a canal and unsure of my steps." Griet would have learned to develop this when describing things to her father, since as he had lost his eyesight, feelings and touch are about all he could relate to. She has learned to pinpoint emotions because of this, and can describe things into great detail.

Griet is quite reserved and does not like to uncover her head as this might expose another side to her a more relaxed and wild Griet, a Griet that she does not want anyone else to see. When people see her hair in particular Vermeer it makes her feel like things don't matter anymore and she will dare to do anything.

Griet is changed by her time with the Catholics and acts very differently after she has lived in their household. Her father said that the riches had "turned her head". Brought up as a Protestant, the riches of the Catholic lifestyle changed her.

Chevalier also looked at the way she sets out the sections in the book. The novel is laid out in years, and smaller sections within the years. There are four years: 1664, 1665, 1666 and 1676. This gives a more realistic feel as chapters often show a more fictional story and showing the years makes it feel more real to us. Almost like a diary rather than a fictional work.

People may wonder why Tracy Chevalier chose this painting in particular. Chevalier says

"I had always loved that painting, I was attracted to the ambiguity of the expression, she is innocent and yet her mouth is open, yet at that time an open mouth was a sign of sensuality"

It was a poster that she has had on her wall as a student and she says that "Within three days I had the whole story plotted out. It was effortless. It was all there in her face" .

Her love of the painting in a way would have helped and inspired Tracy Chevalier to create a plausible story. Chevalier uses a mixture of all the elements I have looked at and more to create a vivid and realistic story in 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' and with only the information given by the painting.