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Insight Publications Pty Ltd  
ACN 005 102 983  
ABN 57 005 102 983  
Suite 1, 128 Balcombe Road,  
Mentone Vic 3194  
Australia.  
Tel.: 03 9583 5839  
Fax: 03 9583 9573

email: [books@insightpublications.com.au](mailto:books@insightpublications.com.au)

**[www.insightpublications.com.au](http://www.insightpublications.com.au)**

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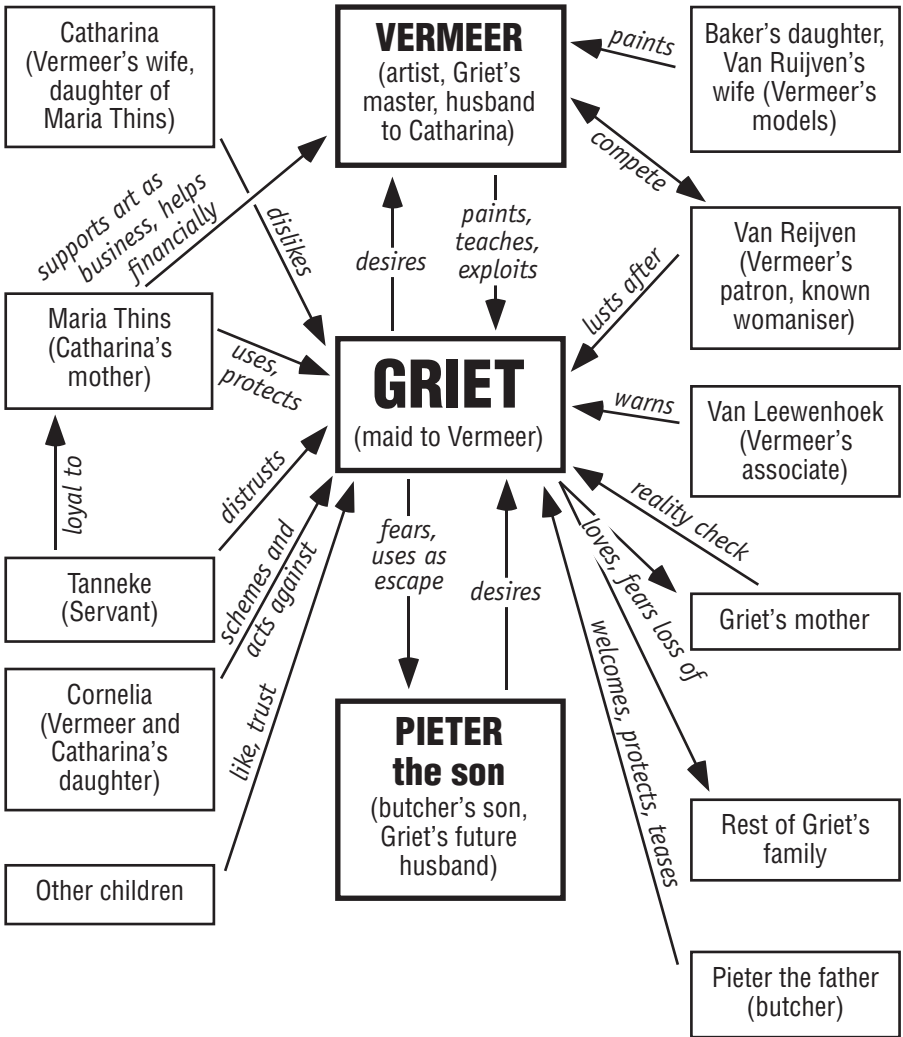
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# CHARACTER MAP



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# INTRODUCTION

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Tracy Chevalier's historical novel, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, is named after a painting by the famous seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Johannes Vermeer. She has owned a poster of the painting — often called the 'Dutch Mona Lisa' — since she was 19 years old: '*I have always loved Vermeer's paintings...There is so much mystery in each painting, in the women he depicts, so many stories suggested but not told. I wanted to tell one of them.*'<sup>1</sup>

Chevalier's story is one of five recent novels that take their inspiration from the work of Vermeer and other seventeenth-century Dutch painters. Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever*, Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Katherine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, Gregory Maguire's *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*, and Chevalier's novel were all published within two years of each other. Read in this context, this text invites us to consider the value and the appeal of Vermeer's paintings to writers and readers today — 330 years after his death. The popularity of these historical fictions — Chevalier's novel was an immediate bestseller — demonstrates the continuing relevance of stories of the distant past to our lives in the present.

*Girl with a Pearl Earring* tells the story of the young woman depicted in the painting reproduced on the novel's cover. Art historians speculate that one of Vermeer's daughters may have been the model for his painting. Instead, Chevalier imagines her as an outsider in the artist's household: a 16 year-old girl, Griet, who leaves her family home to become Vermeer's maid. Chevalier uses what little is known about Vermeer's life as the basis for her powerful tale about the way in which individuals are defined by their difference from others. History provides the setting for fiction. This novel makes us think carefully about the relationship between fact and fiction, truth and lies, what we can and can't know.

In many ways this is a novel about secrecy. Just as the characters in the novel keep secrets from each other, so too Vermeer's painting keeps its secret. We may never know who the girl *really* was, but as this story attests, there is a great deal of pleasure in imagining who she might have been. Chevalier has said that she is 'both universal and specific, and yet you never really know what she's thinking. I think that's why it's such an enduring image.'<sup>2</sup>

This engaging and intelligent novel can be studied from multiple perspectives. Use the material in this guide to develop your own critical responses to it.

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<sup>1</sup> Tracy Chevalier, "About the Author." [www.pearlearring.com](http://www.pearlearring.com).

<sup>2</sup> An interview with Tracy Chevalier. [www.fireandwater.com](http://www.fireandwater.com).

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# BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

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This chapter provides background information about Vermeer and his historical period. It is important that you do further research. However, be careful not to get bogged down in historical detail. Instead, use your research to enrich your analysis of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Study the paintings featured in the novel closely. In a glowing review, Deborah Moggach writes: ‘It is deeply revealing about the process of painting and is best read with a volume of Vermeer’s paintings open beside you — it then becomes a truly magical experience’.<sup>3</sup> The websites and texts listed at the end of this guide are a good starting point. You’ll find excellent reproductions of all of Vermeer’s paintings on the web.

## ***Seventeenth-century Delft, the Netherlands***

The Netherlands (also known as Holland) is a country in north-western Europe, bordered by the North Sea, Germany, and Belgium. Its capital city is Amsterdam, however its government is based in The Hague. The adjective for the Netherlands is ‘Dutch’.

The novel is set in a period of Dutch history known as the ‘Dutch Golden Age’ (c. 1609-1702/13). The 17th century (1600-1700) was a time of economic prosperity and political success for the Dutch. Dutch artists flourished. After Rembrandt, Vermeer is widely considered to be the best artist of this period and he is certainly one of the most famous. Other seventeenth-century Dutch artists include Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), Gerard ter Borch (1617-1681) and Jan Steen (c. 1625-1679).

Chevalier’s story is set in Delft, a city in the west of the Netherlands, which was an important European trade centre in the 16th and 17th centuries. When Vermeer was born in 1632, approximately 25,000 people lived in Delft. The city was best known for its blue and white glazed earthenware (‘Delftware’). In the novel, this is the industry in which Griet’s father works and in which her brother spends his unhappy apprenticeship.

- Locate Delft, Amsterdam and The Hague on a map.

Vermeer scholar Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr writes: ‘By the seventeenth century Delft was already a venerable city with a long and distinguished past. The walls and medieval gates of Vermeer’s native city, visible in his remarkable

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<sup>3</sup> Deborah Moggach, Review of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, 7 August, 1999. Transcript available online at [www.pearlearring.com](http://www.pearlearring.com).

*View of Delft*...had controlled traffic over land and water and provided defence for more than three centuries'.<sup>4</sup> During the 17th century Delft's prosperity and its beauty made it a popular travel destination. One of the city's greatest attractions was the New Church, visible from the house on the Oude Langendijck where most of the novel's action takes place:

From the front of the house the New Church tower was visible just across the canal. A strange view for a Catholic family, I thought. A church they will never even go inside (p.16).

Griet attends a service at this church early in the novel (p.69).

Griet is a Protestant girl who goes to work in a Catholic household. In the mid-17th century, approximately 80 per cent of Delft's inhabitants were Protestant. (They made up about two-thirds of the Netherlands' population.) Simon Schama, in his book about the Dutch Golden Age (which Chevalier read as part of her research), writes that the Catholic minority had an 'existence on sufferance' (p.57); they were tolerated but looked down upon. The grand New Church symbolised the power of Protestant religions in Delft and the Netherlands. Catholics were not allowed to worship publicly; they attended small private churches (known as 'hidden' churches). One of these was next door to Vermeer's mother-in-law's house in an area of Delft known as 'Papists Corner' because of the large number of Catholics living there.

**Q** Trace the references to religious difference in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. According to the novel, how are Protestantism and Catholicism different? How do Griet's family's values and beliefs differ from those of Vermeer and his family?

## **Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675)**

In preparation for writing *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Chevalier read John Michael Montias' excellent book, *Vermeer and his Milieu*. He writes:

In spite of all of my efforts and of those who preceded me in combing through Delft's archives, less documentary evidence has survived regarding Vermeer himself than regarding his grandparents, his uncles and aunts, and especially his in-laws: Maria Thins, the formidable mother of his wife Catharina, and Catharina's irascible brother Willem. Vermeer seems to have been exclusively devoted to his art... There is little to go on to

<sup>4</sup> Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., 'Vermeer of Delft: His Life and His Ancestry', *Johannes Vermeer*, Exhibition Catalogue, National Gallery of Art, Washington and Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995, p.15.

reconstruct his personality, beyond his ability to get along with a very domineering and contentious mother-in-law (p.xv).

That we know so little about Vermeer is one of his attractions for fiction writers. Chevalier used facts as the basis for fiction. That the ‘facts’ of Vermeer’s life are still the subject of debate meant that she was able to imagine the story behind the painting without worrying too much about getting the facts straight. For example, Montias believes that Pieter van Ruijven was probably Vermeer’s patron — as he is in the novel — but other historians argue that there is no basis for Montias’ claim.

### ***Relevant information about Vermeer’s life:***

- 1632: Born in Delft, baptised in New Church (Protestant).
- Little is known about his life between his baptism and his marriage. During his late childhood and adolescence it’s most likely that he lived at his parents’ inn in Delft, the ‘Mechelen’.
- Probably completed a six-year painting apprenticeship during this time, perhaps in another Dutch city.
- 1653: Converted to Catholicism and married Catharina Bolnes, a woman from a well-off family.
- 1653: Joined Guild of Saint Luke as a master painter, but evidence suggests that he painted too slowly to earn his living from painting. He served as its headman twice. In the novel, Griet comes to work for Vermeer because her father is also a Guild member.
- Made some money by trading paintings, but probably devoted little time to this activity (see p.17).
- Inherited the ‘Mechelen’ after his mother’s death in 1670, but this made little difference to his income. It appears that he was financially dependent on his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, who owned the house where he lived for at least the last 16 years of his life.
- Most of the documents mentioning Vermeer which survive today relate to his financial status. We know, for example, that in 1657 he borrowed two hundred guilders from Pieter Claesz van Ruijven, a wealthy citizen of Delft. This record, together with evidence that van Ruijven’s daughter owned a substantial number of Vermeer’s paintings, has led to speculation that van Ruijven was Vermeer’s patron. He plays a central role in Chevalier’s novel.
- Hendrick van Buyten, a baker in Delft, purchased a number of Vermeer’s

paintings. Catharina also gave him two paintings after Vermeer's death as payment for a debt (see p.245). The baker in Chevalier's novel is based on van Buyten.

- Eleven children survived infancy: Mary (Maertge in the novel), Elisabeth (Lisbeth), Cornelia, Aleydis, Beatrix, Johannes, Gertruyd, Franciscus, Catharina, Ignatius and an unidentified child. Cornelia plays the largest role in the novel.
- Close analysis of Vermeer's paintings (composition, perspective, precise detail) has led historians to speculate that he may have used a camera obscura to assist his painting (a lens in a box/cubicle used to project an image onto a screen). While there is no documentary evidence to support this claim, Vermeer's association with Antony van Leeuwenhoek, the inventor of the microscope and other optical instruments, suggests that he possibly had access to such a device. Van Leeuwenhoek was the executor of Vermeer's will.
- Died 1675, aged 43. Catharina claimed his death was the result of the family's financial decline. In his later years, Vermeer found it almost impossible to sell paintings, because of the negative impact of the war between the Netherlands and France on the art market. The war also reduced Maria Thins' income and the family fell increasingly into debt. After his death, Catharina said:

Johannes Vermeer, during the ruinous and protracted war was not only unable to sell any of his art but also, to his great detriment, was left sitting with the paintings of other masters that he was dealing in, as a result of which and owing to the great burden of his children, having nothing of his own, he had lapsed into such decay and decadence, which he had taken so to heart that, as if he had fallen into a frenzy, in a day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead.<sup>5</sup>

## ***Vermeer's Paintings***

Vermeer mostly painted intimate domestic scenes, often featuring a woman alone — lace-making, pouring milk, writing a letter. He also painted religious scenes, streetscapes, and a few 'tronien' including *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. (Note: Troni is a style of Dutch painting which depicts close-up head-and-shoulders pictures of individuals in character dress)

<sup>5</sup> John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu*, p.351 (see REFERENCES & FURTHER READING)



Only 35 paintings by Vermeer survive. It is not known who modelled for him, but research suggests that Vermeer included rooms, furniture and objects from his immediate surroundings in his paintings. Chevalier mentions several of these: Catharina's yellow mantle; the box in *A Lady Writing*; the lions-head chairs; the gilded jug; paintings owned by Maria Thins. Most of the paintings were probably completed in the same room: his first floor studio in Maria Thins' house.

## **Girl with a Pearl Earring (c. 1665-1666)**

A major exhibition of Vermeer's work was held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington and The Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, The Hague in 1995-1996. It was enormously successful and partly explains the resurgence of interest in Vermeer and his historical period. In the exhibition catalogue, art historians Arthur K. Wheelock and Ben Broos describe this extraordinarily beautiful painting:

As this young girl stares out at the viewer with liquid eyes and parted mouth, she radiates purity, captivating all that gaze upon her. Her soft, smooth skin is as unblemished as the surface of her large, teardrop-shaped pearl earring. Like a vision emanating from the darkness, she belongs to no specific time or place. Her exotic turban, wrapping her head in crystalline blue, is surmounted by a striking yellow fabric that falls dramatically behind her shoulder, lending an air of mystery to the image (p.166).

Chevalier attended the exhibition at Mauritshuis where she first saw Vermeer's original painting. In her novel, Griet never has the opportunity to look closely at the finished painting. It is only described once:

The painting was like none of his others. It was just of me, of my head and shoulders, with no tables or curtains, no windows or powderbrushes to soften and distract. He had painted me with my eyes wide, the light falling across my face but the left side of me in shadow. I was wearing blue and yellow and brown. The cloth wound round my head made me look not like myself, but like Griet from another town, even from another country altogether. The background was black, making me appear very much alone, although I was clearly looking at someone. I seemed to be waiting for something I did not think would ever happen' (pp.202-203).

## ***Other Paintings Featured in the Novel***

- *View of Delft* (c.1660-1661). Reproduced on novel's cover. Griet and her father discuss it early in the novel: 'It was a view of Delft, from the Rotterdam and Schiedam Gates. With the sky that took up so much of the painting, and the sunlight on some of the buildings' (p.7) [father].
- *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c.1664). The first painting Griet sees in Vermeer's studio (pp.37-38 & 50).
- *The Milkmaid* (c.1658-1660). Chevalier follows the lead of Montias who suggests Vermeer's servant, Tanneke Everpoel, may have been the model. See p.40 & pp.166-167.
- *The Girl with the Wineglass* (c.1659-1660). Griet never sees this painting. Other characters refer to it as the painting of the 'maid with the red dress'. See pp.134-135 & p.169.
- *A Lady Writing* (Also called *Lady Writing a Letter*) (c.1665). Van Ruijven's wife models for this painting in the novel. This is the painting Griet 'changes'. See pp.135-144 & p.146.
- *Woman with a Lute* (c.1664). One very brief reference (p.137).
- *The Concert* (c.1665-1666). Griet's least favourite painting. Van Ruijven, his daughter and his sister sit for it in the novel. See pp.179, 184 & 201.
- *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (also called *Woman with a Wine Jug*) (c.1664-1665). See pp.95-97, 106-108.
- *The Procuress* by Dirck van Baburen (1590/1595-1624). This painting was owned by Maria Thins. Vermeer included it twice: in the background of *The Concert* and in another painting not mentioned in the novel, *A Lady Seated at the Virginal*. Griet bases the headdress she wears for Vermeer's painting of her on the turban worn by the old woman in *The Procuress* (p.193). Also pp.179 & 218.