

Reading Group Guide
Girl With a Pearl Earring
Tracy Chevalier

INTRODUCTION

In mid-career, the renowned seventeenth-century Baroque artist Johannes Vermeer painted “Girl with a Pearl Earring,” which has been called the Dutch Mona Lisa. *Girl With a Pearl Earring* tells the story behind the advent of this famous painting, all the while depicting life in seventeenth-century Delft, a small Dutch city with a burgeoning art community.

The novel centers on Griet, the Protestant daughter of a Delft tile painter who lost his sight in a kiln accident. In order to bring income to her struggling family, Griet must work as a maid for a more financially sound family. When Jan Vermeer and his wife approve of Griet as a maid for their growing Catholic household, she leaves home and quickly enters adult life. The Vermeer household, with its five children, grandmother, and long-time servant, is ready to make Griet’s working life difficult. Though her help is sorely needed, her beauty and innocence are both coveted and resented. Vermeer’s wife Catharina, long banished from her husband’s studio for her clumsiness and lack of genuine interest in art, is immediately wary of Griet, a visually talented girl who exhibits signs of artistic promise. Tanneke, the faithful servant to the grandmother, proves her protective loyalty by keeping a close eye on Griet’s every move.

The artist himself, however, holds another view entirely of the young maid. Recognizing Griet’s talents, Vermeer takes her on as his studio assistant and surreptitiously teaches her to grind paints and develop color palettes in the remote attic. Though reluctant to overstep her boundaries in the cagey Vermeer household, Griet is overjoyed both to work with her intriguing master and to lend some breath to her natural inclinations—colors and composition—neither of which she had ever been able to develop. Together, Vermeer and Griet conceal the apprenticeship from the family until Vermeer’s most prominent patron demands that the lovely maid be the subject of his next commissioned work. Vermeer must paint Griet—an awkward, charged situation for them both.

Chevalier’s account of the artistic process—from the grinding of paints to the inclusion and removal of background objects—lay at the core of the novel. Her inventive portrayal of this tumultuous time, when Protestantism began to dominate Catholicism and the growing bourgeoisie took the place of the Church as patrons of the arts, draws the reader into a lively, if little known, time and place in history.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, Tracy Chevalier treats us to a richly appointed portrait of intersecting faiths, fracturing family dynamics, erotic awakenings, community scandals, religious tensions, and aesthetic compromises—all filtered brilliantly through the eyes of the young narrator, Griet, whose concise, wide-eyed perspective functions much like Vermeer’s camera obscura, rendering with particularly sharp precision and subtle insight the character of seventeenth-century Delft itself. “The camera obscura helps me to see in a different way, to see more of what is there,” Vermeer muses. Discuss the way in which Chevalier’s writing style achieves a similar effect. What techniques does she use to establish the novel’s particular tone and tension, to enrich the imagery, to develop her characters’ motives, and to encourage us “to see more of what is there”?

2. In the particular emotional realm of this novel, the issue of “seeing” is central. Griet endeavors for much of the novel to manipulate all that she sees into a sort of harmony, beginning with the soup vegetables she so carefully arranges so that they will not “fight when they are side by side.” Likewise, Vermeer’s art relies upon his ability to see the universal in even the most prosaic settings. Griet’s father cannot see at all, and not coincidentally, he is perhaps the novel’s most tragic and impotent figure. What does “seeing” mean to the novel’s other characters? Is it fair to say that, of all the characters, it is Maria Thins who sees the most clearly in the end?

3. Compare *Girl With a Pearl Earring* to other historical novels you’ve read in recent years (e.g.: Jane Smiley’s *The Greenlanders*, A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, and so on). How does Chevalier’s novel—focused, detailed, and tightly framed as it is—complement, complicate, and/or depart altogether from the standard themes and trappings of the historical fiction genre?

4. What is the significance of the eight-pointed star situated among the stones at the center of the town square? What does its presence underscore about Griet’s position in society, whether as a young woman, as the daughter of a recently impoverished family, or as the Protestant maid to a Catholic family? How does Griet’s relationship to the star, and the choices she makes in relation to its eight points, evolve through the course of Chevalier’s novel?

5. What is the quality of life, and what are the opportunities available, for a young Dutch woman in the 1660s and 1670s? For all of Griet’s talent for looking at the world from an artist’s high-resolution vantage, is her eventual progression from housemaid to housewife really nothing but an inevitability, given both the cultural repression of her gender as well as her parents’ poverty?

Discuss the subtle ways in which *Girl With a Pearl Earring* contends with these issues.

6. With the previous question in mind, link Chevalier’s novel to other books throughout history that also explore the conditions of women in society. What, for example, do Jane Austen’s alternately conflicted and compromised heroines have in common with Griet? (You might also consider *Girl With a Pearl Earring* alongside works by Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, and, more recently, Carol Shields and Diane Johnson. What weight do geography, time period, and politics bear upon these issues?)

7. Look again at Vermeer’s painting, “Girl with a Pearl Earring.” In what ways has your perception of the painting changed as a result of reading Chevalier’s book? Are you more likely to attach particular emotions to the girl’s wonderfully ambiguous expression, given Chevalier’s elaborate conjectures and interpretations? Does the girl look more explicitly melancholy or more amorous now?

8. Griet’s fellow maid Tanneke is, perhaps, the most likely to elicit mixed emotions from readers. What was your initial reaction to her? How did it evolve as the novel progressed? Did you struggle with her emotions and choices?

9. Although Chevalier’s book tells a bracingly personal story of one girl’s transition into womanhood 325 years ago, the author’s depictions of love, self-doubt, bravery, and evolving maturity are in many ways universal. In what specific ways do you identify personally with Griet, and with the ways she confronts the challenges and heartaches in her life?

10. “He is an exceptional man,” van Leeuwenhoek says of his friend Johannes Vermeer. “His eyes are worth a room full of gold. But sometimes he sees the world only as he wants it to be, not as it is. He does not understand the consequences for others of his point of view.” Is this an accurate description of Chevalier’s characterization of the master painter in this novel? Discuss the particular ways in which Vermeer’s failure “to understand the consequences for others” affects the other characters. For Griet, what could we say is the cumulative consequence of Vermeer’s chronic refusal to see the world “as it is”?

11. St. Francis De Sales, a sixteenth-century mystic, famously wrote that “the first part of the body that a man wants, and which a woman must loyally protect, is the ear.” With this in mind, discuss the rich symbolism and implicit eroticism behind Vermeer’s mandate that Griet pierce her ear. And what are the implications of Vermeer later demanding that Griet pierce her other ear as well, even though it is completely hidden in the painting?

12. At every level, the depiction of the relationship between Vermeer and Griet is full of sexual tension. Griet is reluctant even

to take off her cap when she is modeling. And when she finally does, the moment that flickers between the painter and the painted is absolutely electric. What does Griet fear will happen once she exposes her untamable hair, whether to Vermeer or to Pieter, her future husband?

13. In the title portrait that results from a series of long painting sessions (during which Griet feels that Vermeer is literally seeing straight into her soul by way of her glistening eyes), we see that Griet’s eyes are moist, the earring hangs in shadow, exotic and shiny, and her lips are parted, which in the parlance of Dutch painting means the woman has lost her virtue. Reread the scene depicting Griet’s final sitting for Vermeer. How does Chevalier bring the above qualities—the moist eyes, the parted lips, and so on—into play during this scene, attaching to each the conflicting emotions of love and fear, pain and longing?

14. What sort of a man is Vermeer? Seeing the world through Griet’s eyes, we as readers are really never privy to his feelings toward Griet, toward his wife Catharina, and toward his chief patron, the lecherous van Ruijven. Although we experience with Griet the fear and eventual heartache she feels as she struggles in vain not to fall in love with Vermeer, we cannot fully know how Vermeer himself is feeling. “His eyes were masked,” Griet tells us. At what point do we finally get an absolute sense of Vermeer’s ambivalent emotions? What subtle clues and muted suggestions does Chevalier insert throughout her narrative to indicate Vermeer’s “masked” longings?

15. Describe the nature of the relationship between Griet and Maria Thins. How does it begin? What roles do intimidation, mutual respect, and complicity play at different points in their acquaintance? How do these color Griet’s role as a maid, and later an artist’s apprentice, in the household?

16. What does the future hold for Griet and her family? For Vermeer’s older daughters? Construct an outline in your head for a hypothetical epilogue set in 1686, a decade after Griet sells the pearl earrings on the last page of the novel. What has happened in the interim?

A CONVERSATION WITH TRACY CHEVALIER

Q: Everyday life in seventeenth-century Delft is so vivid in *Girl With a Pearl Earring*. How did you conduct your research? Where?

TC: *Most of it, I confess, was done in my armchair. I read a lot (especially Simon Schama’s The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age) and looked at a lot of paintings. Luckily seventeenth-century Dutch paintings are mainly scenes from everyday life and so it was easy to see what houses looked like inside and how they were run. I also went to Delft for*

four days and just wandered around, taking it in. Vermeer's house no longer exists, but there are plenty of seventeenth-century buildings still left, as well as the Market Square, the Meat Hall, the canals and bridges. It's not hard to get an idea of what it was like then.

Q: Little is known of Vermeer's life—at least compared with other Baroque painters like Rembrandt. Why did you choose Vermeer's work to write about?

TC: *I chose Vermeer's work because it is so beautiful and so mysterious. In his paintings, the solitary women going about their domestic tasks—pouring milk, reading letters, weighing gold, putting on a necklace—inhabit a world that we are getting a secret glimpse at. And because it feels secret—the women don't seem to know we're looking at them—it seems also that something else is going on underneath, something mysterious we can't quite grasp. The fact that so little is known about Vermeer was happenstance—happily so, as it turned out, for it meant I could make up a lot without worrying about things being "true" or not.*

Q: Were you inspired by this particular painting or by Vermeer's work in general?

TC: *I was inspired specifically by this particular painting, though I know his other work as well. A poster of this painting has hung on the wall of my bedroom since I was nineteen and I often lie in bed and look at it and wonder about it. It's such an open painting. I'm never sure what the girl is thinking or what her expression is. Sometimes she seems sad, other times seductive. So, one morning a couple years ago I was lying in bed worrying about what I was going to write next, and I looked up at the painting and wondered what Vermeer did or said to the model to get her to look like that. And right then I made up the story.*

Q: Is *Girl With a Pearl Earring* a true story? To what extent is it based in fact?

TC: *It isn't a true story. No one knows who the girl is, or in fact who any of the people in his paintings are. Very little is known about Vermeer—he left no writings, not even any drawings, just thirty-five paintings. The few known facts are based on legal documents—his baptism, his marriage, the births of his children, his will. I was careful to be true to the known facts; for instance, he married Catharina Bolnes and they had eleven surviving children. Other facts are not so clear-cut and I had to make choices: he may or may not have lived in the house of his mother-in-law (I decided he did); he converted to Catholicism at the time of his marriage but not necessarily because Catharina was Catholic (I decided he did); he may have been friends with the scientist Antony van Leeuwenhoek, who invented the microscope (I decided he was). But there was a lot I simply made up.*

Q: You chose to give your novel the same title as the painting. Is there a greater purpose for this? What sort of a relationship do you see the novel and the painting having?

TC: *The novel has the same name as the painting because the painting is the culmination of the story; its creation is what the story is leading up to. It also points up the earring, which is important as a symbol because it represents the world Griet gets drawn into and ultimately rejected from. The novel could not exist without the painting. I would never have written it, and I don't think it would have the same resonance with readers if the painting didn't exist.*

Q: Seventeenth-century literature reflected religious and social changes just like seventeenth-century painting. Milton's radical *Paradise Lost* was published during this time. Did you consider this sort of thing when writing a historical novel?

TC: *I didn't consider *Paradise Lost*, but clearly religious change in the Netherlands at the time was a very important issue. The Dutch had just thrown off the rule of the Catholic Spanish and were keen to distance themselves from Catholicism. Protestantism suited their natures. The Dutch Catholics were tolerated but were seen as slightly outside the system, which is fascinating when you consider that Vermeer actually converted to Catholicism, and so chose to be a maverick. You have to consider religious and social change when writing historical novels. They are essential to the push and pull of the story. In fact, all my novels are historical and set during periods of great social change.*

ABOUT TRACY CHEVALIER

Tracy Chevalier was born and raised in Washington, D.C. She earned her BA at Oberlin College in Ohio and holds a graduate degree in creative writing from the University of East Anglia. She lives in London, England.



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PRAISE FOR *GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING*

“A portrait of radiance...Chevalier brings the real artist Vermeer and a fictional muse to life in a jewel of a novel.”
— *Time* magazine

“Outstanding.”
— *USA Today*

“Triumphant...A beautifully written tale that mirrors the elegance of the painting that inspired it.”
— *The Wall Street Journal*

“Superb...Vividly captures the world of seventeenth-century Delft.”
— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“[Chevalier] creates a world reminiscent of a Vermeer interior: suspended in a particular moment, it transcends its time and place.”
— *The New Yorker*

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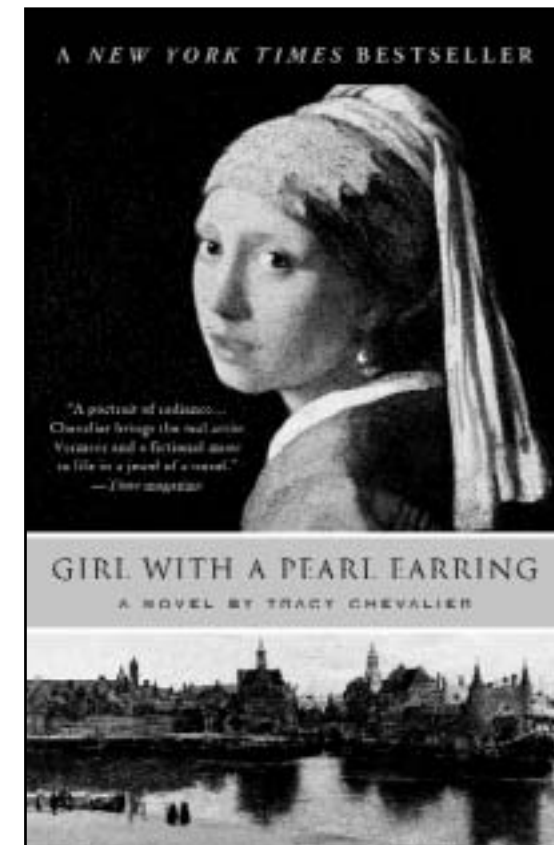


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TRACY CHEVALIER



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