

# Girl with a pearl earring



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Feature Article Forbidden Love The novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* should definitely be Included on the Novel Ideas book club reading list. Elyshla Hickey reveals why this fascinating, historical and romantic story will appeal to an adolescent audience, as it explores the theme of sensual awakening. Set in 17th century Delft, Chevalier's novel explores the deep but forbidden love between a young maid and her master. The author's clever combination of an intriguing story, remarkable characters and descriptive language allowed her to explore the themes of forbidden love, predators and sexual desires.

For hundreds of years people have wondered who is the girl in the portrait *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, painted by a Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer in the 17th century and what is the connection between them. This fictional love story by Chevalier explores the sensual relationship between the young lady and the painter. Griet, a seventeen year old girl, narrated the story of her life experiences in the 1600's, as she transformed from a young girl into a married woman. The narrative structure will appeal to a young adult audience as they will be able to relate to many of Griet's experiences, especially the encounters she had with men.

She was hired as a maid by a rich and famous painter, to help her impoverished family. Vermeer allowed her the privilege of working as his assistant in the studio, which caused much turmoil with his wife. This tension between the characters reads like a modern day soap opera. Vermeer was a gentle and respectful master, and Griet became devoted to him. Her secret admiration of him became increasingly intimate and loving, but not sexual. Vermeer's friend, Van Ruijven requested him to paint Griet.

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Van Ruljven had several unwanted sexual encounters with her. Griet had to deal with the nervous emotions of a young girl learning to cope with sexual predators. Meanwhile, Griet met the local butcher, Pieter, and a friendship developed between them. He became jealous of her relationship with Vermeer, but wanted to marry her.

The scenes in which Vermeer painted Griet were sensual and spellbinding and she was obviously in awe of her master. Read an essay about a Vermeer asked Griet to wear his wife's pearl earrings for the sitting. She knew it would cause more trouble but was obedient to the man she had fallen in love with. This complication built suspense for the readers as they anticipated the wife's reaction.

After Vermeer's wife saw the earrings in the painting, she tried to destroy it. Griet knew she had to leave. She chose to go to Pieter who she later married. When Vermeer died 10 years later, he left the pearl earrings to Griet in his will. The author's mix of realistic events, romantic love, and unwanted sexual encounters reflect a timeless storyline that would appeal to young adults in today's society, facing the same problems. The author has skillfully constructed the characters to assist young readers to connect with them.

The main character, Griet, is a quiet, lonely, innocent and obedient girl, she did not feel at all comfortable: "I did not like the way he looked at me". Griet had some artistic talent and vision and wanted this to be recognized by her master, but was too shy to say anything. She was looking for love and security, which she found in Vermeer.

Vermeer's remarkable character draws young readers in as he was portrayed as a very gentle, caring and loyal man – the type of man you would want to marry. Vermeer never forgot her and left the earrings to Griet in his will. Griet was a respectable young lady and was looking for respectable love; hence she rejected Van Ruijven's advances. He was portrayed as a sleazy predator of young women. Pieter was presented as a solid, hard-working young man. Young readers could easily relate to these main characters and recognise their traits in people around them.

Chevalier style of writing was descriptive rather than emotional. She used very detailed, literal descriptions: "... the brushes arranged on the top of the cupboard, one of the cupboard's drawers left ajar, the palette knife balanced on the easels ledge, a chair moved a little from its place by the door".

This language painted images in the reader's mind, just as Vermeer painted on his canvas. They say a picture paints a thousand words, but in this story a thousand words painted the picture. This made it easy for young readers to visualise the characters and scenes. The author's use of figurative language prompted empathy in the reader, for example, " I was like a dog licking its wounds to clean them, but making it worse". However, the emotions of the characters were mostly left for the reader to infer.

The theme of young love is timeless. Young adult readers will relate to Griet's search for true love and her sadness at having to settle for second best. Understanding what is socially unacceptable is sometimes a tough lesson to learn, especially when it involves forbidden love. For thousands of years, young women have been victims of unwanted sexual advances. Even

these days, young women are the victims of sexual assault by creepy men. Learning how to deal with this problem is a relevant topic for young adults and readers would have empathy for Griet.

Girl with a Pearl Earring was a revealing love story inspired by a beautiful painting from the 17th century. It is an amazing book about the struggles of a remarkable young woman trying to find love, and is highly recommended for young adult readers on the Novel Ideas booklist.