

Maya (A. Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*) Haunted

Character Maya is the daughter of a lawyer in a major city. Even in the beginning of the story, we see that she is a neurotic young woman, haunted by loss and death. She lost her mother to an early death, then her brother leaves her and goes abroad and, on the first page of the novel, her pet dog dies. And, as if this wasn't enough, she is terrified by the prediction of an astrologer that either she or her husband would die within four years of their marriage. She also wants warmth and love, which she got from her father, but which her husband is capable of showing. She laments to herself that '[n]o one, no one else, loves me as my father does.' Her frustration with her husband builds throughout the novel, during which becomes more and more terrified that the time for the astrologer's prediction to come true is approaching. She is an extremely sensitive and sensuous person, who wants 'contact that goes deeper than the flesh.' She is affected deeply by colours and by nature, especially the call of birds, such as the peacock. Maya is affected by all this to the point of psychosis, and later total madness, because she is a sensitive person, who feels rapport with plants and nature. In the end, haunted by the prediction and all alone, she becomes a murderess.

Activities As a young girl, Maya plays in the garden, often with her widowed father. She has the imagination to turn objects into playthings and ordinary sadness into nightmares. After her marriage, she is often alone in a big house, which adds to her terror. Once or twice, she goes out to visit a friend or to her husband's family home, but most of the time she broods at home, inside or in the garden.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive A poignant illustration of Maya's character occurs in the very first scene of the book, when her pet dog dies. She loves all animals, but especially Toto, perhaps even more so because she is childless. The death shatters her, weakens her and throws her back into terrible memories of the past. She 'saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes...It was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered, perhaps, as yet not even experienced, and filled me with despair.'

Sensual Maya's world is the world of the senses: colours, tastes, physical sensations and images. The contrast between her sensual world and her husband's intellectual world is brought out in a scene where she has suggested they take a holiday to south India, rather than to the hills. When he shows not interest, she tries to fire his imagination. 'But I thought you'd be more interested in that [dances in the south] than the hills...it must be such a marvellous sight, so...so violent and...bizarre.' I groped for the word painfully. The vision was so excruciating in its vividness to me...'The masks they wear, and the costumes. And the special kind of music. And it is all out in the open, at night, by starlight...and perhaps they have torches.' After her breathless description, her husband only says that it would be less expensive to wait for a dance performance in Delhi.

Isolated Maya is isolated from the normal social world, both by her own desire to withdraw and by convention that does not encourage women to be 'in the world.' The pain of her isolation is conveyed during a scene when she visits her friend, Pom. This is one of her very few times that she goes out of the house to be with people. Maya is surprised when her friend takes her to a temple because, Pom explains, she is pregnant and she is praying for a son. The childless Maya then says to herself, 'After that, I ceased to hunt, ceased to plan, and merely laid my face into those cool cloths, odorous with camphor and lavender, that recalled mountain waters to me, and ferns, and nights full of stars, for I found myself alone with them after all.'