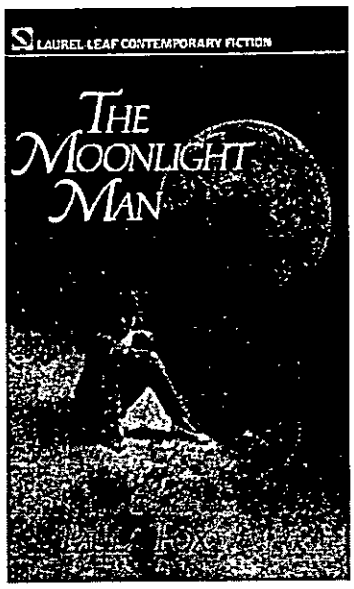
The Moonlight Man — A Feminist Reading

Jennifer Bates

If one were to gather responses from different readers of **The Moonlight Man** by Paula Fox, it would be possible, despite some overlaps, to distinguish the particular emphasis of each response. This being the case, the discussion which follows aims to concentrate on three responses which, it will be seen, focus on three different levels of meaning.

The first level of interpretation insists that meaning, especially the one intended by the author, is best derived from the novel's title and supported by the development of the text. In this particular novel, then, Paula Fox has evolved a case study of a complex personality, one whose character is certainly under the close scrutiny of his daughter. This scrutiny is ultimately adopted by the reader as the evidence on Harry Ames reveals someone whose changes of character, whether alcohol induced or not, affect relationships with other people. The introduction to Mr Ames takes the form of a telephone conversation which influences the impression that, within the space of a short conversation, he can be fast-talking, contrite, self-mocking, and not totally forthcoming, since he insists that "*some things must remain mysteries*".

It may well be argued that Fox presents the idea of a character who is a mystery so that, along with Catherine, the reader embarks upon time spent with him in anticipation of solving some of the mystery. Initially, Harry Ames adds to his



own mystery with the simple admission of being full of surprises, at the same time accepting the aptness of the comparison to Scheherazade. Eventually, though, the reader must return to Fox's concept of a moonlight man in order to confront the enigma that is Harry Ames.

According to Mr Ames, being a moonlight person means that "*. . . I've lived most of my life in a dense fog.*" As he elaborates no further at this stage, for "*. . . being simple was the last thing he wanted to be,*" the reader cannot overlook the fact that part of the case study is about a drunk, a moonshine man. Here, Catherine's charge that her father is not a writer but a drunk and a moonshine man not only gives expression to her rage following the nightlong experience of her father's consumption of illicit liquor, but also intensifies what has already been inferred about Harry Ames being a moonlight man, that is, a person whose life is often chaotic, irresponsible, perhaps even dangerous.

Certainly Mr Ames' claim that men like to be dangerous is realised in his own physical abuse and in the kind of emotional compromise which leads Catherine to the observation that his feelings "*. . . toward her did not alter a hardness of purpose in him where his own wish was concerned. She had not known that drinking could carry you out of your own feelings for people.*" Added to this are her earlier feelings of relief and anxiety as she witnesses the remaining contents of a whiskey bottle being poured down the sink, and later, the stricken knowledge that not all the liquor has been thrown out. Yet, as Catherine learns these lessons about drinking, the reader's own knowledge grows with the suggestion that the label "moonlight man" suggests more than a condition brought on by a drinking problem.

If the novel's meaning relies on understanding the moonlight man, Harry Ames, some thought must be given to the factors which indicate a far from simple character. Catherine's final assessment of her father adjudges him a "*. . . pained and haunted man.*" Having studied him closely for a month, Catherine decides that the physical strain she suffers comes from an association with someone whose

character lacks those traits which people sum up as *"reliable"*. By this means, she has answered a question she had once asked her mother about her father's true character and now better understands the reply, *"He thinks being hopeless about life is romantic, deep"*.

Catherine's first hand experience of living with such a person is intense, rather like living with a crowd of people. One suspects that Harry Ames is under similar pressure as his moods change from uncontrollable mirth over the scene with the crone and the stuffed parrot, to irritability at Catherine's use of the expression *"Had it"* and the remoteness that settles on him as he gets his way in reading Coleridge aloud. Calm by day and wakeful by night, Harry Ames' *"wars"* are complicated by liquor but the source of his real trouble is far more difficult to define. Catherine realises that his writing is a sensitive subject, with several travel books but only two novels to his credit. His second novel is an apparent failure because, by the time of its writing, his true character had caught up with him. Reluctant to discuss either his writing or his early life, Harry Ames is quick to demonstrate his other selves. One of these personalities needs to charm people such as Reverend Ross and Mrs Conklin for reasons which might include being an actor and proving to the locals that he was also a star. Another feature of this charm is being quick to lie and, according to Catherine, to lie so fast that he becomes too charming. Harry Ames acknowledges that this has always been his trouble, as if he had no choice in the matter.

While the concentration on Harry Ames can be cogently argued, a second level of interpretation urges that the reader is intended to focus more on the situation of Catherine Ames. In this case, the meaning of the text centres on Catherine as the victim of her parents' divorce. Hitherto accustomed to short, infrequent visits from her father, the extended time with him is transformed for her into a period of growing up. At the outset, the reader's sympathy for Catherine is called into play as her father's record of tardiness is laid down and her decision to wait for him becomes a matter of also covering up for him by deliberately eluding her mother. Such is the strategy this fifteen year old needs to employ not merely to have time with her father but also to avoid incurring her mother's wrath, along with the charges of blame and irresponsibility that would go with it.

Catherine recognises and must cope with her mother's suspicions concerning her father. She was slightly suspicious of the Dalraida school because it was his choice. The reader's response is carried along with the details of Catherine's parents' attitudes towards each other, their clashes, and their hostility. In particular, Catherine has already had the opportunity to understand that her mother's attitude towards her father has been shaped by his failure to be normal and decent like other people, like, for example, Carter. Further, Catherine realises that her mother has become so embittered by such attitudes that many of these judgements distorted the truth. Thus *"There were things, Catherine had begun to understand, that were so untrue there was no point in arguing about them."*

At the same time, her juvenile response to Mr Ames' query and comment about her mother's work is genuinely governed by a desire to know more about her parents. Known lack of knowledge is always confusing and unsettling, even more so for Catherine who longs to have gaps filled in and yet fears the knowledge. Her feeling of confusion turns to a sense of being oppressed. Her father sustains these feelings by sounding superior to the past and to his marriage, describing Catherine's mother as a daylight woman, at the same time striving to impart parental advice with wise sayings.

Apart from her desire to know more about her parents' marriage, Catherine's need is to have a promise fulfilled. While it occurs to her that a promise has been fulfilled in the " . . . *cramped rooms where they had talked so much*" , Catherine is forced to wonder if her father realised the same. After all, a significant aspect of Catherine's growing up during

their vacation is her understanding of what her father meant by *"someday"*. The places he promised to take her would be visited through his memories and his experiences as he recounts stories of the past. *"She had realised that for her father, talking itself was an event, a journey."* Even though the promise of this holiday with him had come true, part of Catherine's wisdom is to accept that she has no expectations as far as her father's promises of the good times to come are concerned.

As the time spent with Mr Ames goes by, the reader's sympathies are further directed into sharing Catherine's emotional upheaval as she confronts both his drunkenness and his humanity. The physical and emotional struggle she and her father engage in following his night of horrifying intoxication sets up a new conflict for the daughter whose father demands forgiveness. In her own mind, too, Catherine wrestles with the possibility of disliking someone while loving them, even though such loving is difficult. The father she had chosen to wait for has wearied her and become a burden, despite " . . . *all the pity she felt.*"

Inclined to be dismissive of her father as well, Catherine nevertheless hopes for some more shared laughter before their final parting. The conclusions she draws about the future of their relationship are realistic in seeing their paths diverge. The inevitability of it all made her think " . . . *how she would probably never know him better than she did at this moment . . .* "

The satisfaction Catherine feels as she and her father part is taken from the sense that her parents' divorce, which had been the main fact of her own life, was now final. This becomes an appropriate point to discuss a third level of the novel's meaning, one which finds significance in the re-positioning of Catherine Ames in her father's life. The essential argument here is that the father/daughter relationship which, at the beginning of the story, Catherine hopes to consolidate, fails to materialise because she develops into an all too familiar figure in his life.

During their vacation, Catherine is confronted with her father's attitudes towards women. Repelled by the introduction to his drinking, Catherine contemplates whether the vacation is one meant to be spent away from women, using alcohol as his escape and her as his excuse. For Catherine there are instances where this thought appears to be corroborated. Prior to the fishing expedition with Reverend Ross, Mr Ames' need for a drink is seen as a defiant action. Moreover, Catherine's silent challenge is quashed by Harry Ames in terms of not being told what to do, " . . . *especially not by young females!*"

In keeping with Harry Ames' tendency to divide the world into opposing groups, he is also disposed to generalise in a way that reveals more than is elaborated. In declaring that *"Women are a race of barbers"*, Harry Ames' thoughts demonstrate more than an opinion on women's innate ability to shave someone. Such thoughts are, in fact, far more cynical than the throw away line, *"The knowledge of shaving is deep in you"* suggests. In a metaphorical sense, barbers are associated with ruthlessness and emasculation. When one considers the scene where Catherine shaves her father, one is drawn to the conclusion that he has staged the event so that Catherine, a member of the race of barbers, can carry out her work on a humbled man. On other occasions, Catherine is constrained to challenge her father's attitude towards men and women, and the idea of females being the way they ought to be,". . . *more tractable*" . She capably identifies his long held opinion that women are better than men as a *"disguised insult"*, to which he responds by commenting on her *"nice eyes"*, an insult not even thinly disguised. Catherine's consciousness of the need to defend the status of women is further exhibited when she readily turns around his suggestion of the women waiting within while the men are out fishing. Increasingly, Catherine moves into the world she accuses her father of dividing in half, *"My mother one side, you on the other"*.

When Harry Ames first addressed his daughter as his suspicious girl, his words echoed the past and beckoned the future. Despite the power of her father's rhetoric in rendering things that seem other-

wise as insignificant, there can be no doubt about what is signified by her father's expressed belief that he has made her so suspicious. Acutely aware of her father's ability to recognise opposition, Catherine is also confronted by some disturbing self-admissions. She questions what he says, she doubts him, he even sounds uncertain as, for her, all certainties begin to break up.

The repositioning of Catherine Ames in her father's life comes as part of that self-realisation which occurs when a child admits that she is not central in her father's life, that they both have a life elsewhere. For Catherine it is epitomised when she understood the cause of her peculiar feeling as he left, " . . . *she realised he had gone because she had dismissed him.*" For the reader, the image of what Catherine has become in Harry Ames' life is clarified when she returns to her mother. The writer's craft in conveying this image to the reader is revealed in the portrayal of a physical tussle that results in the unexpected:

She had not known she was as big as her mother, her arms as long, her shoulders as broad and strong, until she became aware that she had gathered her mother up and was holding her as one would hold a child, a child who, if you let her go for an instant, will run away and hide herself.

The unexpected had already found expression in Harry Ames' whisper, *"Not if I see you first."* This, together with the admission Catherine forces from her mother with her own fierce whisper, brings the realisation that Catherine now occupies in his life a position similar to that of her mother.

These three interpretations, particularly the last, all provide evidence in support of feminist theory. Instead of concentrating on the development of plot, Fox has presented the psychological concept of gender in terms of male/female roles and, more significantly, in terms of a father/daughter relationship. Here Kate Millett's work is useful in drawing attention to patriarchy, or rule of the father, as the cause of women's oppression. Fox draws attention to Catherine's feelings of oppression at her father's discourse. Harry Ames insists that such oppression is necessary until that time when children can discover their own truths. Moreover, he becomes *"boisterous"* as he persists with his warning that Catherine, too, will oppress her own children, emphasising his own superior role position and echoing Millett's description of the patriarchal subordination of the female. In Millett's terms, Catherine finds her father subordinating her with his wise sayings, even though she did not want to be his student.

Despite his failures as husband, father and writer, Harry Ames continues to exert power in domestic life. It was he who had decided that Catherine needed to live in Montreal because she was becoming a " . . . *New York city hick*"; it was he who had selected the Dalraida school; it was he who would pay for everything, " . . . *including an eyelash curler, if Catherine went in for such things.*" For their part, Catherine wanted to accede to her father's wishes, while, in time, " . . . *her mother yielded.*"

In accordance with early feminist writing, Harry Ames is the oppressor who consciously strives to sustain the oppression through ideology. While it is not the intention of this writer to condemn the male authors Harry Ames endeavours to include in his daughter's literary repertoire, it is apparent that the literary values he has adopted are those shaped by men. Fox has deliberately included references to authors such as Dylan Thomas, Coleridge, D.H. Lawrence, Shakespeare. It is surely not insignificant that she has also included a reference to Virginia Woolf, whose work, Harry Ames asserts, no-one reads. His daughter's reply that she has read Virginia Woolf receives no comment.

Whenever Harry Ames comments on his view of life, Fox ensures that the reader recognises the confidence and superiority that is part of his male identity. Catherine notes how he sounded superior to the past " . . . *as though he'd believed all along what he believed now.*" Later, she notes his facility at deconstructing the significant and

the insignificant, "*. . . drowning her in language*" as he does so. Finally, there is the realisation that he often speaks of "*winning*" people, enshrining his superiority with his verbal prowess.

In summarising a feminist interpretation of the meaning of **The Moonlight Man**, attention must focus on the role of the father-figure in Catherine's coming of age. Accepting Lacan's three phase account of the Freudian Oedipus Complex, one can trace Catherine's transference of affection from her mother to her father, the threat of "castration" in the threat of being cut off from her father's world, and her subsequent identification with her mother, forming a sense of her own identity in the process. Fox's treatment of her subject is subtle and sensitive. She uses her craft to allow the reader to respond with a variety of meanings, but leading persuasively to a feminist interpretation.

References

Fox, Paula 1987, **The Moonlight Man**, Pan Books, London.

Selden, Raman 1989, **A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory**, 2nd ed., Chp. 6, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire.

Biographical Note

Jenny Bates taught English, History and Drama in New South Wales secondary schools for fifteen years before moving to her current position of Teacher-Librarian, a post which she has held for three years. Since her initial B.A., Dip.Ed., she has completed an M.A. History (Pass with Merit), Sydney, and a Graduate Diploma in School Librarianship, Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education. She is currently in an M.Ed. (Hons) course at Wollongong University, specialising in Children's Literature.