

On Parenting in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*

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Abstract

Parents play a crucial role in their children's education. Whether they are careless or absent from their homes, their children's lives are impacted negatively. Despite the wide range of themes in *Moon Palace*, the lack of parental care is worth considering. Paul Auster has created a story featuring three generations of people from the same family who lived in mono-parental homes and who suffered continuous trauma. Drawing on the sociological theory, this paper aims at denouncing the absence of parents in the education of their children. In fact, Julian Barber, Solomon Barber, and Marco Stanley Fogg have suffered because of a lack of parental care. The hypothesis of this study suggests that the future of the family members is likely to be jeopardized when both the mother and the father are not involved in the education of their children. My paper advocates for greater guidance from parents and educators to insure the holistic development of children, thereby enhancing the moral development of societies.

Keywords: Human rights, child abuse, child protection, trauma, offspring, victims.

Introduction

Parents are very instrumental in the upbringing of their children. Teachers equally play important roles in the fulfilment of their students. Nevertheless, in a context where parents and teachers fail to play their social and moral roles, the lives of the children and students are jeopardized. Paul Auster, an American writer and film director dramatizes the lack of parental care in his novel *Moon Palace* (1989), which is set in Manhattan and the Midwest. The novel portrays the life of the narrator Marco Stanley Fogg and the two previous generations of his parents.

The novel opens with the narrator informing the reader that he had lost his mother, Emily Fogg, and would stay with his uncle, Victor, who would soon pass away too. As the story unfolds, the reader realizes that Fogg has gone through a series of ordeals that almost castrate his life. He had no one to rely on. Because he had no relative to lean on, his daily life was a chapter of starvation and homelessness. Furthermore, the reader is informed that the narrator receives a job as the caretaker

of a wheelchair-bound old man named Thomas Effing, supposedly his grandfather. Fogg's experience with this old man, who narrated his life story enables him to trace his biological roots. He eventually realizes that Thomas Effing has had a son named Solomon Barber, Marco Fogg's son. He begins his journey with his father Solomon Barber, who dies shortly after an accident at Westlawn Cemetery, where Fogg's mother is buried. Marco continues his journey alone after making his girlfriend Kitty Wu abort her pregnancy, which ends on a lonely California beach. Definitely, *Moon Palace* chronicles the life of the characters in a quest for harmony between their inner terrain and the external terrain, constantly searching for peace.

Aims and Scope

The experience of Julian Barber, Solomon Barber and Marco Stanley Fogg is not unique. There are many children in the story that suffer in life because of poor parenting. From a sociological perspective, this paper seeks to censure the absence of parents in the education of their children. It further examines the redemptive measures children should take to face the hardship of poor parenting. In the process, the paper advocates for a better care from the parents to insure the holistic development of their children and henceforth the full development of human families. The first part of the paper investigates parents' roles in children's education. The second part raises queries about poor parenting and the last part encourages all parents to take good care of their children for the development of the latter.

Parenting and Child Education

Parental roles in children's lives are beyond explanation. Once a child is born, he/she become part of a family and those who have conceived them must be liable for their welfare. Parents constitute a source of security and protection to children. Usually, a child that sees his/her parents is always proud and confident because he/she knows that whatever happens, their parents will defend and care for him/her. For example, when a child is hungry, they simply go to their parents to seek food; children are so confident that they do not doubt parents' capacity to provide for their needs. Parents represent every humanly possible thing for their children.

A safe home for children represents the basis for a sound family and, by extension, a community. Moreover, the presence of a family—that is community—is, in the words of Mark Brown (2007), “a way to connect to the wider social world and to locate oneself in the complexities of the global

metropolis”(161). This quotation infers that children seek to connect with their parents. Parallel to this statement, once a child feels parental affection, they acknowledge their own presence in the world and can boast of it.

Parents have the primary role of helping build children’s characters. They are required to educate their children by instilling values in them. Hence, parents have a big role to play as far as children are concerned. Along the same line, Peter Sandiford (1925) argues that “the responsibility of parents for the formation of the characters of their children is overwhelmingly great’ (387). As a result, parents have to know that the values they instill in their children determine to a large extent their future. Most of the time, children imitate their parents. Understandably, parents should provide good education to their children so that when they grow they could become responsible citizens in the society. Sandiford opines that “every good parent trains their child to be courteous and mannerly” (387). It is worth noting that courtesy and good manners are a result of good education. In actual sense, children depend on parents in so many regards. They depend on them in many areas of their lives because parents shape children into adulthood. So, parents “are especially obligated to care for children until they become adults” (Umberson, 2006: 48).

In discussing the role of parents in the upbringing of their children, each parent is supposed to know his/her role. A father, for example, should know that his role in socializing with his children is of paramount importance. Boys usually take their fathers as their role models. According to Thomes (1968), “the son directly internalizes the male role through his interaction with his father, since the father is in many regards the adult male with whom the son interacts.” In this regard, parents are expected to act as constructive role models and teachers for their children. Sadly, some parents behave as if they do not feel any need to be role models to their children. While fathers should, as stated above, serve as role models, they are often perpetrators of negativity and hostility in their families. Besides being aggressive, violent, and abusive towards children, fathers often terrorize their wives.

Paul Auster, through a careful depiction of Julian, Solomon and Marco, shows that when parents fail to be responsible caregivers to their children, the future of the latter is endangered. He uses the behavior of the characters symbolically to raise queries about irresponsible parenthood.

Raising Queries about Parents' Responsibility

In *Moon Palace*, all the characters who are the parents have failed seriously in their parental duties. From the beginning of the novel, Marco Fogg, the main character suffers from lack of proper parental care. As discussed in the first section, a father is supposed to be a role model to his children. In such a case, he transmits moral values to the children who in turn will do the like to the future generations. Solomon Barber, in this novel, a university professor, hence an educator, had an affair with his own student. There are many stories of such incidents in the world today. In the academia today, there are stories of university professors having sexual relationships with their female students. The BBC reported recently on sexual harassment cases in universities in West Africa, known as "Sex for Grades" because some professors harass their students sexually in exchange for passing grade (BBC, 2019).

It is a well-known fact that universities are temples of knowledge. As such, those who embody this knowledge are expected to exhibit moral conduct that the learner could emulate. Young Solomon Barber began teaching at the university and yet dared to have a sexual relationship with Emily. The narrator reveals that: "This Fogg was a student of mine back in the forties. I had only just started teaching then" (Auster, 1989, 236). Fogg informs the reader that Solomon "had slept with my (his) mother only once (on a damp starless night in the spring of 1946), and by the next day she was gone, disappearing from his life for good. He did not know that she had become pregnant, did not know that he had a son, did not know the first thing about what he had accomplished" (238). As the passage underscores, Solomon Barber has had sex with Fogg's mother once and impregnated her unknowingly.

As far as teachers' or professors' roles are concerned, they have the responsibility to communicate knowledge to their students. Oftentimes, teachers are believed to profess characteristics such as morality, wisdom, hardworking, peace, know-how, justice, to name only a few. Teachers are thought to be guardians and custodians of knowledge. Because a university professor teaches adults, he/she has to be more cautious and firm regarding morality. Consequently, he/she has to cherish and transmit sound moral ideals to students so that our societies reflect those values. The author of this study agrees with Mary Warnock (1975) when she writes that teachers who do not present and develop their own positions fail to educate their students.

Teachers have the responsibility to teach students to judge fairly on the evidence, and to understand, to get them to think about right and wrong, good and evil, to think, that is to say about morals. A woman or a man without moral views is after all a monster and it is “hard for pupil to realize that the neutral teacher is only play-actin. The first rule of teaching is sincerity, even if one’s sincerity is dotty or eccentric” (As quoted in Liston, 121).

Society expects teachers to train students to be law-abiding citizens in order to contribute to society's development. Dahlike (1959) argues, and the author of this study agrees, that “the teacher would be expected to uphold, defend, and promote one set of values as he is expected to criticize, attack, and debunk variant values” (129). If a teacher is expected to promote values, what will happen when he rather perpetrates immorality? Solomon Barber, again and again has gone against the deontology of his profession. The author of this study blames Solomon because as an instructor who should be committed to the students’ learning process and make considerable progress toward achieving success, he rather jeopardizes Emily Fogg’s life.

Interestingly, many people seem to ignore that the school is an extension of the community and teachers’ life inside and outside the classroom is often kept under close scrutiny. It is true that teachers cannot be denied the privileges others enjoy. They are like any normal human being and have feelings and desires. It is normal, for instance, when Solomon Barber acknowledges that Emily Fogg “was a beautiful and intelligent girl,” (237); there is nothing wrong in having that feeling. Others in the society too, upon seeing Emily Fogg, may express the same appreciation. But the fact that Solomon Barber goes ahead to have a sexual affair with her, knowing well that he will be censured once discovered shows that he lacks self-discipline.

To be more explicit, teachers influence greatly their society and thus contribute to its development. Supreme Court Justice Powell writes in *Amback v. Norwick*, “a teacher serves as a role model for his students, exerting a subtle but important influence over their perceptions and values. A teacher has an opportunity to influence the attitudes of students toward government, the political process, and a citizen’s social responsibilities; his influence is crucial to the continued good health of a democracy” (Underwood: 2012, 18). This quotation outlines clearly the big responsibility of a teacher in a given community.

Sadly, some teachers do not prioritize morality, but rather promote immorality and sexual

misconducts. Some have their students pass their subjects not on the basis of merit but rather on the basis of sex, money or affiliations. Students who resist these proposals coming from such immoral teachers pay for their decision; they usually fail.

Solomon Barber is not the only character to prove himself an irresponsible person. When the reader considers the behavior and actions of Thomas Effing, it can be inferred that Effing is also an irresponsible father. Thomas Effing, born Julian Barber, is the grandfather of Marco Fogg and the father of Solomon Barber. He is the first irresponsible parent in *Moon Palace*. Even though he was legally married to Elizabeth Wheeler, his desire to travel to the West destabilized the family.

Because he has decided to start a new life when he is away, he changes his name. This action of name change is suspicious and demonstrates his irresponsibility. Arguably, his change of identity can be considered as a way of escaping his responsibility. The narrator informs the reader that “it was in California that he invented his new name, turning himself into Thomas Effing when he signed the hotel register on the first night” (184). The term “invented” in this quotation indicates his desire and crookedness. Interestingly though, one can argue that Julian Barber has become Effing so that people would not know his whereabouts, especially his wife. A man should face life’s challenges, work hard and solve his problems. In fact, to be a man is not easy and therefore one should be strong in character and surmount most difficulties.

Apart from the fact that Effing changes his name, another irresponsible deed is that he runs away from his wife. Indeed, marriage is not for immature people. It is meant for people who can stand tall after toils and snares, challenges and hardship. Surprisingly, the narrator does not tell the reader that Effing leaves home because there is no food to eat, or that he cannot provide for his family. Even though the reader is not clearly informed about the reason that motivates his escape from his home, one can rightly comment that it is for the search for fame. It is worth mentioning that fame without a sound home might result in chaos.

Akin to Emily Fogg who does not want people to know of her past, Effing also refuses to disclose the truth about his past. The reader learns through Marco Fogg that discussing Elizabeth, Effing’s wife:

I'd promised myself not to make any enquiries about Elizabeth. I was curious –it would have been impossible not to be curious—but at the same time I didn't want to open that old can of worms again. The past was the past, and it was all closed shut for me. Whether she was alive or dead, whether she had remarried or not (195).

The reader is intrigued to know why the narrator does not want to reveal the idea behind Elizabeth. In essence, Effing has been narrating his life to Fogg with whom he will publish his autobiography. Telling him all about Elizabeth is also necessary for the understanding of his past. Even though Effing is aware of this part of the story, he does not do so. The author's analysis suggests that Effing is aware that the story of Elizabeth is squalid. He knows that the knowledge of the truth liberates a person. If the narrator were able to excavate the hidden agenda of Effing with Elizabeth, the reader might probably refrain from continuing to read the book. The reason is that Effing's attitude vis-à-vis his wife has been that of torture, whipping and enslavement.

As a result, Effing's refusal to discuss Elizabeth with Fogg may bring him bad omen. Usually, during wedding ceremonies, the marriage officers make the following statement: "...for the best and the worst ...". Hence, a married person is not supposed to abandon his/her partner on any account. With regard to the consequences that irresponsibility in a family can create, there is a need to encourage parental responsibility for brighter homes.

Encouraging Parental Responsibility

Marco Fogg, the protagonist of the novel is the first victim of parental irresponsibility. To begin with, when he was born, he did not know his father. He was therefore an illegitimate child, a bastard. For a child not to know his father is a shame and that child develops trauma. Fogg was psychologically instable and sick.

As the story unfolds, Fogg recognizes his father as Solomon Barber and treats him harshly. He considers his long lost father as a traitor, dishonest and destroyer of the future of a child. He states: "For the first moments, I felt nothing but anger, a demonic surge of nausea and disgust." He even referred to his father as a "fucking hippopotamus" (292). These words clearly denote the level of his father's irresponsibility.

When parents fail to play their role, they jeopardize the future of their children. Very often, children from such families do not have a stable family life. This flaw is pervasive in *Moon Palace*. Thomas Effing's irresponsibility yields Solomon Barber who in turn behaved similarly. The result is that there are three-generations who do not know who they actually are, where they come from and why they are in this world. Marco Fogg, being the offspring of this mayhem, had nothing to say more than: "my origins were a mystery, and I would never know where I had come from. This is what defined me, and by now I was used to my own darkness..." (295). The expression "mystery" in this quotation shows clearly that his parents were irresponsible. He does not advocate for the absence of parents in their homes. The absence of Fogg's father has had lasting effects on him.

There are various consequences of parental irresponsibility. The consequences affect individuals and even the community. One consequence of parental irresponsibility in the *Moon Palace* is hunger. When a child is born, his parents have the duty to provide for his education, food and other needs. In this novel, Fogg's childhood was debilitating. As stated earlier, he did not know his father and anytime he asked, no one gave him an answer. When he was eleven years old, his mother passed away, leaving him under the care of his uncle Victor who also died three years later. There begin Fogg's difficulties. He had no chance to eat as normal adolescents because he knows none of his family members. The following passage shows that Fogg nearly starved:

I did not starve, but there was rarely a moment when I did not feel hungry. I often dreamt about food, and my night that summer were filled with visions of feasts and gluttony: platters of steak and lamb, succulent pigs floating in on trays, castlelike cakes and desserts, gigantic bowls of fruit. During the day, my stomach cried out to me constantly, gurgling with a rush of unappeased juices, hounding me with its emptiness, and it was only through sheer struggle that I was able to ignore it. By no means plump to begin with, I continue to lose weight as the summer wore on (29).

Hunger caused Fogg to become nihilistic. He loses all hope in life. As the text reads:

I was in despair, and in the face of so much upheaval, I felt that drastic action of some sort was necessary. My action would consist of a militant refusal to take any action at all. This was nihilism raised to the level of an aesthetic proposition. I

would turn my life into a work of art, sacrificing myself to such exquisite paradoxes that every breath I took would teach me how to savor my own doom (21-22).

In a real sense, Fogg's despair and pessimism result from parents who fail in their duties as father and mother. Moreover, if Fogg wishes death as highlighted in the text: "I would be dead broke, a flotsam of flesh and bone without a farthing to my name," (21) it is because he no longer understands anything and nothing interests him, Solomon Barber and Emily Fogg are the source.

Conversely, Emily Fogg too has to be blamed for her unbecoming attitude that has caused suffering to an innocent child. She is a new student at the university and knows what she is pursuing. Unfortunately, she could not say "no" to her professor and eventually gives in. Arguably, it can be inferred that Emily too is a loose lady. Although some critics will find such a statement highly critical, the author of this study believes that if she were well brought up and an obedient child, she should not fall for her professor. After all, she was not the only female student on the campus, and probably, he courted other female students in the same school but the latter were able to say "no" to him. Emily too could have refused to yield to her professor.

Oddly, Emily kept the whole matter secret. It is a fact: she has been impregnated by her professor. It is a shame. However, refusing to tell people what has happened is unwise. She might have been assisted by the law or her community members. Besides, instead of telling her brother, Uncle Victor or most importantly her son Marco that his father misbehaved towards her and left her without a word, Emily never unveiled the truth. We are informed through Fogg that Emily said nothing to him about his father:

With my father, however, all was a blank, both during and after." [That is during his mother's life time and death] "That was the only subject my mother refused to discuss with me, and whenever I asked the question, she would not budge. 'He died a long time ago,' she would say 'before you were born.' I imagined him as a dark hared version of Buck Rogers, a space traveler who has passed into the fourth dimension and could not find his way back. (4)

In a real sense, what happened was irreversible. Trying to cover it up and pretending that nothing happened worsens the whole situation. Emily has given birth to a baby boy who has grown. Having

children is a blessing because there are thousands of women in the world who wish to have children but are unable to.

The reader is surprised to know that Emily Fogg lies to her son when she says his father died long ago. Associating death with a living person is a bad omen. The fact that Emily Fogg kept the whole incident secret shows that she too is irresponsible; otherwise she would have been bold to unveil the whole matter. Actually, one can infer that Emily's attitude leads her son to be hopeless and nihilistic. It must be borne in mind that parents' misbehavior like that of Emily Fogg often leads children to become delinquent, and social outcasts. In so doing, Marco Fogg is neglected and becomes repulsive. Specifically, if children become armed robbers, prostitutes, and commit other vices, parents are mostly responsible. In this perspective, Mathe (2007) argues that "neglected individuals grow up feeling unwanted by the world and often repulsed by touch and affection. They become hardened, may harbor deep feelings of rage and resentment at their parents or the world. They develop an attitude of 'I don't care about anything or anyone', in order to disguise a much deeper pain about feeling unloved (136). No wonder that Emily too dies at the beginning of the book. The wrong is done, and the only solution should be to face it.

In addition, parental irresponsibility has led younger generations to go astray. Fogg's parents were irresponsible. As a result, he too became irresponsible when he impregnated Kitty Wu, his Chinese American girlfriend. Although the statement "like father like son" is polemically critical, the author of this study partly believes that the way a father treats his wife and children influences their sons' treatment of their wives and children. The consequence of the sexual affair between Barber and Emily is the birth of Marco. Marco in his turn, does exactly the same thing with Kitty Wu when he makes her abort the pregnancy. When Fogg, through the narrator, tells his readership that "Kitty discovered that she was pregnant" and they should arrange "for an abortion," does he not know that such an act is akin to criminality or a murder? By having her abort, Fogg is in no way different from his parents and grandfather.

Moreover, it is important that people understand the parental responsibility. The upbringing of a child entails seriousness and commitment. It is shocking to hear the narrator state that "there's a tremendous responsibility in having a child, and it has to be taken seriously" (279). Children are vulnerable and therefore need serious care as stated in the quotation.

One last consequence of parental irresponsibility was Solomon Barber's dismissal from university. Instead of acting well to preserve his dignity and position, he had sex with his female student:

A nineteen-year-old freshman in bed with her history professor. There were rules against that kind of thing...He was dismissed, Emily ran back to Chicago, and that was the end of it. His career never rebounded from the setback, but even worse was the torment of losing Emily. It cling to him for the rest of his life (238).

Through this passage, it is clear that for Auster, teaching is a public work, and a teacher should be a role model. If teachers fail, the society will not leave them unpunished because their reputation influences the youth more than anyone else. More explicitly, educators should not endanger the lives of those they are educating. They have to cling unto the ethics of the teaching job in order to fulfil their duty wholeheartedly.

It is worth mentioning that the education of children whose parents are irresponsible or absent from the homes is challenging. A child has the right to get a good education. But when parents are not there to follow up with the work done by teachers at school in the education of children, the future of those children will be uncertain. For instance, Fogg was born in a fatherless family. Soon afterwards, his mother died and he was left at the care of his uncle. Few years later, the uncle also died. Although Fogg struggles to graduate from university, he is unable to, because there is no one to assist him. In this regards, Fogg is not only psychologically affected, but his educational achievement stumbles as well. According to Kriesberg (1979),

A consequence of particular social concern is the educational handicap which children from fatherless families seem to suffer. There is evidence that such children have lower I.Q.'s, are retarded in school, and complete fewer years of study than do children of complete families (288).

As the foregoing substantiates, the absence of a father affects the intellectual capacity of the child, and he may dropout from school or do poorly. As the evidence suggests, the education of Fogg is a glaring example. If he is not able to complete college and get a degree, his parents might be held accountable. As a result, Fogg suffers from what Brown (2007) terms "disconnection, loneliness, confusion and irresolution" (118).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to denounce parental irresponsibility in child education. The paper argued that most parents in *Moon Palace* failed in their duty of educating their children and securing a bright future for them. Thus, the study has castigated the attitude of Thomas Effing, Solomon Barber, and Emily Fogg whose recklessness destroyed the innocent Marco Fogg. As a wakeup call, parents should play their role in order to insure a promising future for their children. Effing, Solomon Barber, and Emily Fogg could have been responsible and no one would talk of a certain Marco Fogg's ordeal. Since they failed to do so, it has been crucial for this study to underscore that the innocent Marco becomes the scapegoat. Equally, the paper highlighted the role of teachers who are central agents in the education of students. As educators, teachers are encouraged to be more concerned with enabling students to both acquire and critically examine moral beliefs. It would be highly instructive for those in the teaching field to revisit the ethics of their work to avoid jeopardizing the future of children. As a recommendation, people should be encouraged to mature before getting married in order to avoid the risk of jeopardizing the future of children.

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