Fast Lanes Short Guide

Fast Lanes by Jayne Anne Phillips

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Characters

Most of Phillips's major characters in the stories in Fast Lanes are psychologically scarred by the deterioration of their families and their subsequent uncertainties about their own identities. Their emotional stability varies from the madness of Rayme and the manic egocentricity of Mickey to the resignation of Thurman and the placid acceptance of Bess.

Rejected when her father chooses the children who will remain with him and abandoned when her mother starves herself to death, Rayme responds by deliberately choosing behavior which will further set her apart. She gloats in the link to her mother which her madness supplies, and she refuses to acknowledge conventional concepts such as ownership or the distinction between edible and inedible substances.

Kato Black, who was abandoned by her mother in "Blue Moon," depends for her sense of identity upon her role as Billy Hampson's girlfriend, and when Billy's mother pressures him to enroll in a boarding school, Kato finds the proposed separation unendurable.

Her suicide attempt, a desperate attempt to keep Billy in Bellington, has precisely the opposite effect, ensuring that Billy will be sent to boarding school, and she will be sent to live with her aunt.

Mickey, the recently fired bartender and would-be musician talks non-stop to the customer who has picked him up. His stories of the many older women he has slept with, and of the brilliant music career awaiting him in London, do not conceal his insecurity and self-doubt. Although he brags about his power over women, he finally reveals his rejection by his adoptive mother, the only person he has ever really loved.

In "Blue Moon," Danner Hampson finds herself caught between a number of opposing forces: her father's failures and her mother's resentment; Kato's obsession with Billy and Mrs. Hampson's fierce desire to protect her son by controlling his life; her own immaturity and her need to understand the adults around her. Although Shinner Black tries to explain the past's hold on him and Jean Hampson, Danner does not realize that the death of Tom has caused her mother to feel completely isolated, deprived of her love and her dreams. Danner cannot comprehend such loneliness until, in "Fast Lanes," she has experienced equally devastating losses. Where Jean tried to escape through marriage to Mitch, Danner has tried sex, drugs, and rootlessness —living in the fast lanes, passing everything. Returning home forces her to acknowledge the futility of all these attempts and leads her to question the possibility of achieving the apparent certainty of people in earlier times.

Thurman offers Danner hope; he claims to have quit running from his family and his past, though he still cannot fully understand either. The youngest son of a famous high school football coach, he has always been a misfit, preferring woodworking to football. Because he could not measure up to his father's expectations as an athlete, Thurman

tries to gain his father's attention by recklessly inviting serious injury in the final game of his senior season. When his father seems more interested in the championship trophy than in his concussion, Thurman's behavior becomes increasingly unconventional. For a while, he becomes a ski bum, then he runs dope, next he serves a stint in the Peace Corps in Ceylon, and finally he becomes a hippie carpenter. Accepting responsibility for his mentally incompetent parents, he returns two or three times a year to check on their welfare and to arrange for routine maintenance of the family home, but in their attempts to escape reality, his father refuses to admit that any repairs are needed, and his mother acquiesces in this delusion.

By taking Danner to his parents' home, Thurman shows her the destructive results of refusing to accept reality. His brother, like Danner's, chose to go to Viet Nam where he was killed.

But Thurman's mother, like Danner, clings to the illusion that her son is alive; and her delusion leads to alcoholism and mental confusion.

The character most accepting of the past is Bess, Danner's grandmother.

From the perspective of her eighty years, she recalls her dead siblings, especially her brother Warwick, whom she regarded as a virtual twin. When she was twelve, the traditional age of maturity, Warwick took her to a concealed spot where they could watch sexual intercourse between their brother and his wife. From Warwick, too, Bess learned about death as she helped to nurse him through a near-fatal allergic reaction. She believes her voice called him back from death then, but sixteen years later she could not save him from death in the coal mine. Although she eloped with a man, who later deserted her, and bore a child that Warwick would not allow him to acknowledge, she remains bound to him — vicariously experiencing his death but this time too far removed, physically and psychologically, to call him back again. Now an old woman, Bess sees how his illness and his later death not only changed the course of her life, but initiated her into the mystery of death.

Social Concerns/Themes

In Fast Lanes, as in her earlier fiction, Phillips depicts the dislocations in contemporary American life. She examines in minute detail the impermanence of human relationships and the resulting destruction of individuals. Confronted with an impersonal society and disintegrating families which supply no enduring values, Phillips's characters can rely only on their own limited inner strength for support in their inevitable personal crises. Generally they have experienced — or are experiencing — either actual losses or omens of such losses. While the forms of their reactions vary, Phillips's people recognize the frailty of their psychological balance and use emotional detachment to shield themselves from further pain.

Thus handicapped, Phillips's characters sometimes try to establish bonds with others, but such attempts seem always doomed to failure. Rayme, the title character of her story, has moved back and forth among communal houses and the homes of relatives but she carries with her the isolation resulting from her parents' divorces and her mother's suicide. Thus, she remains the perennial outsider. Mickey, in "How Mickey Made It," describes the women he has lived with, most of whom are older than he; yet none of these women can compensate for his rejection by his adoptive mother. Five years after her divorce, Kay regards her marriage and her children as "Something That Happened"; just as her physical pain was eliminated when half her stomach was removed, so she has recovered her emotional equilibrium by withdrawing from the lives of her husband and children. At the same time, Angela, the youngest daughter, has adopted values more conventional than Kay's; she too is detached from other people, however, especially her parents and siblings.

Most of Phillips's families are dysfunctional, but inescapable. Unable to cope with the difficult twelve-year-old who had been abused, Mickey's adoptive parents made him a ward of the state and so, in his words, shipped him off to a correctional facility. Yet Mickey remains bound to them by an obsessive hatred, and he constantly disparages his entire family. In "Fast Lanes," both of the principal characters are alienated from their families. The narrator feels compelled to return home to visit her ailing father, but she dreads the moment of her arrival and knows she will soon leave again. Thurman, her companion, sporadically visits his mentally confused father and alcoholic mother in the decaying family home. Thurman is still trying, unsuccessfully, to find meaning in his family's losses; so, despite his assertion that he should stay away, he continues to hold his home together, physically and emotionally.

Likewise, while trying to understand her family's painful past, Danner Hampson of "Blue Moon" provides a psychological anchor, not only for her emotionally aloof parents, but also for her brother and his unstable girlfriend.

"Bess" tells of a sister and brother, as they first understand the types of love, the meaning of death, and the extent of their mutual dependence. Born just thirteen months apart, the two youngest in a family of twelve children, Bess and her brother Warwick grow up as twins; the age gap sets them apart from their older siblings and their aging

parents, and their primary loyalty is to each other. Except for Bess's brief marriage, which Warwick refuses to acknowledge, the two remain together until Warwick's death forces the sale of the farm and scatters the remaining family.

In "Bluegill," another account of obsessive love, a pregnant woman addresses her unborn child, whose father she does not name or acknowledge. Living among strangers, this narrator is cut off from her past, and her world consists of only herself and the fetus she thinks of as an almost mythical sea creature. Although she receives monthly checks from her baby's father, he is indistinguishable from the other men in her past and less real to her than some local fishermen who have been shipwrecked and presumed drowned.

Phillips's choice of "Fast Lanes" as the title story suggests that these stories, taken together, serve as a commentary on sanity as a precarious balance between reality and illusion. At one extreme, Rayme has chosen delusion, rejecting all forms of conventional reality. To a lesser degree, Mickey's prospective music career represents a triumph of self-delusion, as does the pregnant woman's belief that she and her child will be able to live in a dream world that unites them and excludes all others. Likewise, Angela and Kay in "Something That Happened" irrationally and whimsically pursue the interrelationship of the emotions and the body systems.

It is Danner Hampson, however, who consciously considers the question of reality and illusion, as a central character in "Blue Moon" and "Fast Lanes" and perhaps the anonymous narrator of "Rayme." Danner sees the destructive effects of illusion in the parallel cases of her mother's devotion to a long-dead fiance and Kato's obsession with Billy. Equally damaging is the illusory wife/ mother whom Warwick invents to perpetuate the fiction of his emotionally incestuous relationship with Bess. By allowing Warwick to claim Mitch Hampson as his son, Bess forces Mitch to deal with the double rejection of Warwick's coldness and abandonment by his supposed mother.

Danner's self-delusion involves her attempts to escape the reality of her family's failures and losses, to lose her past and herself through ceaseless wandering, moving in the fast lanes.

She envies earlier generations, who seemed to see reality clearly and to accept their lot, but she wonders if her view of such people is only another illusion. Thurman, who claims to have left the fast lanes, reassures her that his grandfather possessed a sense of certainty and that acceptance is difficult but still possible; both Thurman's incessant travels and Bess's concluding story of Warwick, however, undercut this assertion, suggesting that life is, at best, an equilibrium of reality and necessary illusions.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The themes of individual isolation and reality/illusion are ancient and almost universal. Modern precedents include the fiction of Joseph Conrad, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce, whose technique of the interior monologue may have influenced the story "Bluegill." Similar emphasis upon the question of illusion is seen in the novels of John Barth and John Irving and in the plays of Edward Albee and Eugene lonesco. Phillips's portraits of the disintegrating family find parallels in the work of Gail Godwin, Anne Tyler, and Bobbie Ann Mason.

In technique Fast Lanes is in the tradition of Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, and Sherwood Anderson.

The lyrical quality of Phillips's prose is reminiscent of Wolfe's prose poems in Look Homeward, Angel (1929), and the themes of family failure and individual alienation are equally typical of Wolfe.

Like Faulkner and Anderson, Phillips has assembled a collection of stories linked by related or recurring characters, and by themes, upon which the stories provide multiple perspectives.

Fast Lanes resembles Faulkner's Go Down, Moses (1942) in its portrayal of several generations of one family and in its multifaceted development of the isolation theme. Phillips's emphasis upon the warping influence of obsessive self-delusion also recalls Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919).

Related Titles

The stories of Fast Lanes continue to develop the themes introduced in Black Tickets (1979) and Machine Dreams (1984) — the disintegration of the family, the isolation of the individual, and the contemplative person's search for values and identity. Other similarities include Phillips's use of a variety of narrators and narrative techniques: the monologue in "Bluegill" and "How Mickey Made It"; the reminiscence in "Rayme," "Bess," and "Blue Moon"; and the retrospective narrative in "Fast Lanes" and "Something That Happened."

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