Machine Dreams Short Guide

Machine Dreams by Jayne Anne Phillips

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

M achine Dreams begins with Jean Hampson's letter to her daughter, describing her own childhood and her relationship with her mother, Gracie Danner. Jean's youth seems to have been characterized by loss and hopelessness: Her fiance died of a heart attack, her mother died of cancer, her brother married and moved away, and always Jean was alone. Jean appears to be typical of many women in the 1950s and 1960s. To escape her loneliness, she marries and devotes herself to homemaking, abandoning her ambition to become a nurse. Eventually, though, she becomes dissatisfied and begins taking college classes, one or two at a time. After finally receiving her degree and teaching certificate, Jean gradually takes over the role of chief breadwinner for the family, and for the first time she begins to challenge her husband's authority to make the family's decisions. When her children leave for college, she files for divorce, no longer frightened by the prospect of living alone. She wonders, however, if her actions have caused her son to drop out of college and refuse to resist the draft.

The second section belongs to another of the novel's major dreamers — Jean's husband, Mitch Hampson, a World War II veteran who tries, unsuccessfully, to become prosperous by turning his army experience with heavy machinery and concrete to civilian uses.

Born in 1910, he is almost a generation older than Jean, but he too has experienced loneliness, as both his father and his mother have apparently rejected him. Although he has been involved with several women, he has not considered marriage until he meets Jean. He believes a wife should never question her husband's authority, and the combination of his business failures and Jean's increasing independence leads to a continuing state of hostility between them. After their divorce, he again lives with his Aunt Bess, just as he did in his childhood. When he learns that Billy is an MIA, he too considers his responsibility for his son's fate.

Mitch's closest family ties are to Aunt Bess, her husband, and their children, Katie Sue and Chuck, who is called Twister or later Twist. After a brief early romantic involvement and pregnancy, which the family has kept secret, Bess lived on the family farm until her brother's death forced its sale.

Then, an old maid in her early twenties, she moved to the nearest city, became a secretary, and married Clayton Bond, the younger brother of her boss, Dr. Bond. When the two town doctors built a hospital, she ran it, becoming essentially a practical nurse.

Fiercely protective of her unacknowledged son, Mitch, she provides him unconditional love and acceptance, always taking his side in arguments with Jean. She also defends her alcoholic husband, Clayton Bond, whose death means the final ruin of Mitch Concrete and his partner, Mitch. Bess and Mitch attribute Clayton's drinking to his fear that Katie will die. Certainly Katie's bout with rheumatic fever leaves her a sickly child, and Mitch's actual nightmare about her death probably is shared by Clayton and Bess.

Danner Hampson is the first child of Jean and Mitch. Her initial narrative recounts her early memories of collaborating with her brother in schemes to outwit their parents, but she also recalls disputes which she calls upon their parents to settle. Perhaps because they are only fifteen months apart in age, Danner and Billy seem very protective of each other, and most of Danner's childhood recollections seem to involve her brother also. Danner's sections focus upon her own maturation but develop the implied contrast between her relationship with Riley and Billy's relationship with Kato. The emphasis seems to be upon the way Danner is affected, first by the conflict between her parents, and later by Billy's fate as an MIA. At the end of the novel, Danner's is the consciousness left to try to make sense of what has happened to her family.

Although Billy is the narrator in four sections, he seems less articulate than his sister. Where Danner dreams of horses, he dreams of airplanes and sneaks into a hangar to get a close look at one's cockpit. Billy also differs from Danner in his attitude toward sexuality; his sexual liaison with Kato Black is an accepted part of his life, but he does not expect that she will remain faithful to him. More fatalistic than his sister, Billy drops out of college because he believes he is fated to go to Vietnam and he sees no point in waiting for the results of the draft lottery.

By including a section of Billy's letters and a section of Mitch's, Phillips directly parallels Billy's experience during the Vietnam war with his father's World War II experience, demonstrating the difference in the ways the two wars affected the American consciousness.

Another foil for Mitch is his lifelong friend, Reb Jonas, the son of Dr. Jonas.

An irresponsible youth, Reb talks Marthella Barnett into an unsuccessful joint suicide attempt when she tells him that she is pregnant with his child but his father is scheduled to perform an abortion. Because Reb becomes a doctor, he does not serve in the army during World War II, and when Mitch returns, he finds that Reb has settled down, although his wife's behavior seems to suggest that he sometimes is unfaithful.

Jean's emotional support comes primarily from Gladys Curry, whose daughter is married to Jean's brother.

After Gracie Danner's death, the newly-wed Jean and Mitch live with Gladys until they can afford a house of their own. Gladys becomes, in fact, a surrogate mother to Jean and grandmother to Danner and Billy. Gladys, who is a widow, is somewhat unconventional in her attitudes as well as her dress, and Mitch blames her for Jean's growing independence.

Social Concerns

While Machine Dreams certainly could not be considered a war novel in the usual sense, World War II and the Vietnam war frame this novel as the actual wars marked the boundaries of an era in American life. Just as World War II was the defining event of Mitch Hampson's generation, so Vietnam was for his son's. As Phillips clearly demonstrates, however, these two wars were vastly different. Mitch, who sees the distinctions only belatedly, expresses the attitude that military service is Billy's patriotic duty. Danner, Mitch's daughter, does not consider the war justified; her attitude is that of the draft resisters. On the other hand, Billy, like many of the war's combatants, believes any discussion of the war is futile; Vietnam is simply his fate. By allowing each point of view to be presented by the character in his or her narrative, Phillips defines the issue and presents all the attitudes more or less objectively.

The Vietnam war is the largest issue Billy faces, but for Danner the corresponding issue is marijuana use. Again the generational discrepancy is clearly portrayed. In the World War II generation of Reb, Mitch, and Clayton, the drug of choice is alcohol. Mitch may warn Reb against letting Clayton drink too much, but consumption of alcohol is not illegal. Thus, Mitch becomes very angry with Danner when she is arrested for possessing a small amount of marijuana, and he is even more upset that neither Danner nor Billy seems to take her crime very seriously.

Once again, Phillips provides a snapshot of the 1960s generation; her characters express both points of view, but she makes no judgment.

Techniques

Perhaps because Phillips's original genre was the short story, her novels usually consist of numerous separate and vivid episodes, told from various points of view. In Machine Dreams, Danner narrates six sections, Mitch and Billy four each, and Jean three. The overall effect is a mosaic which conveys events accurately and allows the reader to understand the attitudes and motives of all the major characters.

Phillips also suggests that the lives of her characters are essentially a microcosm for events in the larger society.

Thus, she carefully sets the Hampsons' personal conflict against the backdrop of national conflict surrounding the Vietnam war.

Another hallmark of Phillips's style is its poetic quality, especially the lyrical quality of her prose and her vivid description of significant events and scenes. When Danner and Billy pry up the floorboards in their house to see its foundation, clearly their action is symbolic as well as believable behavior for young children. Equally striking are symbolic images such as Mitch's bulldozer, the cement trucks, Danner's dream horses, Billy's plane, and later his helicopter.

Themes

Phillips's primary theme is lack of communication and its effects upon the people involved. The pattern begins with Gracie and J. T. Danner, who shout at each other through locked doors but never actually talk to each other. Their conflict is a secret their daughter Jean tries to keep, and she repeats their failure with her own husband, Mitch, who also does not really talk with the people he loves. Raised in a family whose secrets have led him to feel rejected by both parents, he seems to communicate with Bess and Katie Sue; he writes many letters, but he carefully avoids telling them anything he thinks will upset them. With his wife and children, he is actually brusque at times, expecting them to accept his statements without question.

In the larger world, lack of communication is even more directly related to secrecy, as Danner and Mitch discover when they try to obtain information about Billy. Danner receives a letter from one of her brother's army buddies, who describes the circumstances when Billy was shot down. The army refuses to give either Danner or Mitch any information to confirm or refute this account. Although Danner angrily insists that the army owes her a complete explanation, and Mitch humbly pleads that government officials tell him more about his son's fate, both requests are refused on the grounds of national security.

Lack of communication leads inevitably to the breakup of the family, and even the loss of Billy cannot reunite the Hampson family. Both Jean and Mitch possess a number of admirable qualities, but neither can express his or her feelings or expectations to the other.

Jean still grasps at romantic dreams of her life with her dead fiance; on New Year's Eve she lies to Mitch in order to sneak out alone and visit the cemetery.

On the other hand, Mitch is troubled by nightmares about his war experiences and fears that his business will fail; however, his ego will not allow him to express these feelings to Jean.

Thus, angry arguments are their only form of dialogue, and eventually each is disappointed in the other. The marriage ends when they discover they have nothing in common, although Jean and Mitch do not actually separate until their children leave for college.

Raised in this environment of constant hostility, Danner avoids any deep romantic commitment; she becomes first a tease and later a promiscuous young woman. Billy settles for a one-sided commitment in which he is faithful, although his girlfriend is not.

Key Questions

Phillips repeatedly portrays the individual caught in the crisis of a disintegrating family. Frequently, the failure of the family structure parallels more general failure in the society as a whole. In Machine Dreams, for example, the conflict among the Hampsons represents the conflicts in American society. Mitch, the World War II veteran, cannot understand his daughter's opposition to the Vietnam war of his son's almost fatalistic indifference to being drafted. Like many mothers, Jean urges her son to remain in college, not to gain an education but to retain his deferment. Discussion groups might analyze the contrast between Mitch's service in World War II and Billy's tour in Vietnam. Phillips raises the issue of the country's attitude toward returning Vietnam veterans and later toward MIAs.

As family bonds are loosened, Phillips's characters frequently find themselves adrift without meaningful social or personal values. The result is personal isolation seen most clearly among the Vietnam veterans, and also in Danner's relationship to her father and to the legal system. Discussion might consider the causes and effects of these changes in traditional national, family, and personal values. Another relevant topic is Phillips's overall tone of frustration and uncertainty.

More than most of Phillips's fiction, Machine Dreams attempts to be a family saga encompassing several generations.

Discussion might examine the repetitive patterns of coldness, secretiveness, and withdrawal as seen in three generations of Danner's family. Discussants might compare Phillips's use of the dysfunctional family with that of Anne Tyler and Gail Godwin.

1. Mitch Hampson and Clayton start their concrete business during the business boom after World War II.

Explain the reasons for this boom, and describe its extent.

2. Mitch's letters describe his service in the Pacific theater of operations.

How accurate are his descriptions?

What kind of experiences would he be likely to omit in letters, especially those to Bess and Katie Sue?

3. Mitch Hampson wants to build his family a bomb shelter. What kinds of civil defense preparations did citizens and the government make in the 1950s?

4. Danner becomes actively involved in the MIA issue. Describe the controversy surrounding the MIAs from the Vietnam war. Why has there been greater emphasis upon these MIAs than upon those from other U.S. wars?

5. Danner is active in the draft resistance movement, and she urges Billy to flee to Canada instead of serving in the army. How accurately does Phillips describe the attitudes and activities of the resisters and the draftees?

6. Danner is arrested for possession of marijuana. Are her arrest and punishment typical of drug trials during the 1960s?

7. The characters of Machine Dreams represent three distinct eras: the Depression, World War II, and Vietnam.

How do their attitudes differ ? How great are these generation gaps?

8. Katie's illness leads to rheumatic fever because penicillin is unavailable during World War II. How accurate is this portrayal of stateside medical treatments at that time?

9. Both of Phillips's novels are set in West Virginia, primarily during the 1960s. Why does she concentrate upon that time and place?

10. Is Phillips's style consistent with the Southern Gothic tradition? Does her work more closely resemble that of William Faulkner or that of Anne Tyler?

11. Discuss Bess's strong feelings about Old Doc Jonas's abortions. What is the basis for her objections? How does her personal history influence her attitude?

12. Jean completes her education and eventually divorces Mitch. In what ways does she reflect the assumptions of the women's liberation movement?

In what ways does she retain traditional values?

13. Phillips uses repeated patterns such as the similarity between Kato Black and Marthella Barnett, between Jean and her mother, or between Reb Jonas's wife and his mother. What thematic purposes does this repetition serve?

14. All their lives, Danner and Billy are very protective of each other. How does this attitude influence Danner's reaction to the news that Billy is missing?

15. Is Mitch Hampson a representative man of his generation? Which attitudes and reactions are typical?

What is his responsibility for the breakup of his marriage?

16. Some reviewers have criticized the multigenerational scope of this novel, claiming the focus becomes blurred. What purpose is served by Jean's accounts of her parents? What is the thematic link between Mitch's experiences and those of his children?

17. Phillips creates several vivid images, perhaps because she wrote poetry before she wrote fiction. Describe several of these images, and explain their associations.

18. Bess, Danner, and Mitch also appear in several of the short stories in Fast Lanes. Is their portrayal here consistent with the way they are depicted there?

19. What are the various machines of this novel? How do they figure in the dreams of the characters?

20. Who is the central figure in this novel? Is there one actual protagonist?

If not, what is the central focus which replaces the protagonist?

Literary Precedents

Phillips's multiple narrators link her to William Faulkner, and her lyrical prose resembles that of both Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. The almost epic scope of the Hampson family saga is also reminiscent of Wolfe, who likewise portrays children trapped in their parents' conflict. The dissolution of the family is a recurring theme in modern fiction, especially in the novels of Anne Tyler and Gail Godwin. The Vietnam war's effect upon the soldiers' families is dealt with in Bobbie Ann Mason's novel, In Country (1985).

Related Titles

Machine Dreams develops the themes introduced in Black Tickets (1979) and reenforced in Fast Lanes (1987) and Shelter (1994): the disintegration of the family, the isolation of the individual, and the contemplative person's search for values and identity. As in Shelter, individual conflicts are seen in counterpoint with national conflicts. Other similarities include the poetic quality of Phillips's prose and her use of a variety of narrators and narrative techniques: the monologue, the reminiscence, and the retrospective recounting of events.

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