

Robert Dale Parker: On "The Man-Moth"

? Moths never aspire, and no reader could previously have associated aspiration with Man-Moths, having never heard of the things before. Only people (Men, in the language of the poem) aspire, so that the poem becomes an allegorical commentary on human ambition and the restraint of ambition by fear, especially fear of failure. The Man dares not ascend, because he knows he will fall; whereas the Man-Moth believes he will fall if he dares ascend, but dares not refuse to try.

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Wish is the world ? or manner of imagination ? in which those who do not believe and who do aspire will find the most the pleases them. The world of have they find confining. They aspire to more than they can have, and they cannot believe they will ever reach what they aspire to, so that only wish is left to fill the space between satisfaction in the here and natural, and faith in the hereafter and supernatural. Bishop thus choose wishes instead of unbelief.

? the Man-Moth bravely seeks something sublimely exterior to himself and at the same time fears the ordinary all around him that he seems to fantasize into something sublimely oppressive. He tries, in the first half, to escape into aloneness, but in the second half, the populated world around him reasserts its routine.

The routine comes back so strongly that all of a sudden Bishop addresses her readers directly as if we not only could but probably will enter the Man-Moth?s company, which so bursts the familiar barrier between our quotidian, readerly expectations and his eerie fantasies that, at the last, the poem changes again, once more and finally deserting the world of routine for the unpredictable underworld of shadowy fable:

[Parker quotes the final 8 lines of "The Man-Moth."]

Until this ending, although Bishop has encouraged us to identify with the Man-Moth?s heroic daring and oppressed loneliness, she has led us to identify in emotion, never in action. Then, abruptly, she addresses us as if we share the mythical world that until then she has described as apart from us and as fantastically imaginary. Where before she called forth our identification through allegorical parable and not through any sense that she referred to our world directly, now she assumes casually that we not only share the Man-Moth?s world but even that we rule it and might well capture him and violate the pristine independence she earlier presented so sympathetically. Like watchmen, we patrol the illusory world and hold it up to the cold, flashlight scrutiny of synthetic vision. The once-pitiful little man-moth emerges as large, with its eye big enough to shine a light in, and ? in comically human words ? able to "palm" or "hand over" a tear. The poem?s otherworldly scale merges with our familiar scene as now we face a zoological peer, more like a criminal on the streets than an alien sprite. From the sympathetic, opening "Here" that mixes so oddly with the extraterrestrial "above" that Bishop joins to it, we change to the guarded but earthly distance of watching and disarming. By breaking our identification ? and her own ? with the Man-Moth, the final

stanza's swerve gives a sense of conclusiveness. Perhaps Bishop then feels a guilt or regret for deserting what she had romanticized, which leads her to sentimentalize the final lines, as if to compensate. That hardly helps, for in the process she condescends to the once-wild and boldly wishful creature, reimagining him as timid and obedient.

? At the end of the this poem, therefore, imagination is a beaten or ? when it survives ? a guilty thing. The Man Moth's is forced underground or even killed, though killed only incidentally, while Man raids his treasure, like raiding a conquered culture's art, to supply the trumped-up museum imagination of a culture physically more powerful. The residue of human imagination is thus desperate and wishful, hanging on by its spoils, agonizingly secondary.

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