

# The Shadow Woman: Who is Mary Gordon? A Discussion on an Author's Feminist Identity

by Megan Galbraith

How do memoirs differ from the autobiography? Both literary styles celebrate portions of the author's life. However they take very different approaches in the representation. An autobiography tends to follow chronologically through a person's life. It focuses on specific events, awards, or accomplishments of the author. Autobiographies emphasize facts and figures that a memoir may not deem important. In general, autobiographical texts read more like history books. Memoirs, on the other hand, resemble fictional novels. They differ from the autobiography because they have a looser form. Authors of memoirs usually emphasize particular memories with no adherence to the chronological order of a timeline. Memoirs have a fragmented design that mimics the fragmentation of memory. They give unique insights into the author's world, specifically how their mind constructs their past, and how subconscious desires and selective remembrances affect the world in which they live. The memoir as a writing style makes new leaps towards analyzing our subconscious. It addresses issues about the construction of memory that autobiographies do not deal with. An author may enter into their memoir with the intention of writing one story, and upon exiting they have constructed an entirely different text. Whether they realize the difference between what they wanted to say and what they said depends upon many factors. Mary Gordon, author of four bestselling novels, published her memoir, *The Shadow Man*, in 1996. After reading her memoir in one of my classes during the fall of 1999, I was left with an unsettling feeling. I began to wonder if the story Gordon told was what she had intended to portray. Discussion by my classmates convinced me that indeed, her memoir told something that Gordon was not aware of. Within the first few pages, a major contradiction develops between who she claims to be and what she writes. Gordon boldly states that she is a feminist. "There is much about me he would have hated. He didn't want a daughter who was a feminist" (Gordon, xix). Yet she does a great job proclaiming her subservience to her father throughout the entire text. As a feminist, how does she feel about portraying her life as obedient to patriarchy? Contradictions and blaring inconsistencies throughout *The Shadow Man*, overlooked by Gordon, illustrate this obedience. Thus Gordon's claim to be a feminist within the first twelve pages of the book prompts a rigorous critique of her story and her life.

At the beginning of *The Shadow Man*, Mary Gordon writes a short prelude entitled "To the Reader." In this introduction, she sets out to apologize for, explain, and justify her writing, as well as her motivation behind the book. Instantly the introduction sets a tone for the reader. It makes you wonder why she feels compelled to write a prelude of this sort, before she has given you any chance to experience the book on your own, to draw your own conclusions. Can her writing really be so controversial that she must appeal to the reader directly off the bat? Does Gordon sense that she is about to tell a disturbing story, a contradictory story, and therefore must make excuses for it? "I don't know whether it's a fault of character or a fault of the age, this need to explain myself... Perhaps anyone writing about herself at such length must fight the impulse to apologize" (Gordon, xxiii). "To the Reader" summarizes the entire memoir within the first twelve pages. The author walks you through the chapters to follow, right up to the end. She touches on all the major emotions that has experienced throughout the journey of gathering information and putting together this book about her father.

Mary Gordon's father died when she was seven years old. "I always said his death was the most important thing that could be known about me. I placed what I called my memories of him at the center of myself" (Gordon, 38). In her memoir, *The Shadow Man*, Gordon tells about her quest to find her lost father. She searches for a way to recapture his life, to understand who her father was in relation to herself. She organizes the search much like a police investigation. First Gordon begins by laying her memories on the table. She pulls up forgotten events and suppressed emotions, and constructs the history of her father's death from her child's mind. Then Gordon steps back and takes a new approach. She attacks the search like she would any research project. She visits libraries to dig up the books, magazines, poems, and other writing material that her father published while he was alive. She tries to analyze the material objectively, by removing herself from the role of daughter and placing herself into the role of researcher. "I'm not here to

protect him, I'm not even his daughter. I'm the hunter, the detective. I'm here to find information" (Gordon, 56). The research pulls up unsettling truths about the man her father was. She comes across anti-Semitic articles that he wrote, as well as a pornographic magazine that he published. "I am furious that my father has made me think about these things. That I have to think of him screwing girls who want to get into the magazine" (Gordon, 61). Reading the material is difficult for Gordon, yet she continually tries to justify his writing, to reason about his ideas despite their horrifying content. She asks "Is it possible to speak evil words and not be an evil man?" (Gordon, 98). As a feminist, how can Gordon accept that her father objectified women's bodies? Instead of rejecting her father's work, Gordon in turns compares herself to the naked women. She grapples for her father's approval as a sexual object. "I keep wondering whether, if he saw us both, he would think she was more beautiful than I" (Gordon, 74). She becomes angry "for making me worry about my breasts in relation to my father," (Gordon, 74). Yet despite her anger, Gordon still yearns for the approval of this man. How can she maintain her feminist ideals if she needs a man who published pornography to define herself as a woman?

After her search through the libraries, Gordon tracks down her father's identity in national archives and census reports. She discovers that her father lied about his family, the town he was from, and his ethnic background. She decides to visit his birthplace and she also attempts to track down his forgotten family. In the final chapters of *The Shadow Man*, Gordon gathers all of this evidence together and attempts to reconstruct her father's identity. She writes abstract stories which reiterate her love, loss, and confusion. We as readers never quite get the feeling from these closing pieces that Gordon was able to deal with the loss of her father or his place in her life. In addition, Gordon throws together one random chapter about her mother, a character rarely mentioned throughout the rest of the book. She ends the memoir with an account of the day when she had her father's grave moved. The chapter, entitled "Unburying and burying my father: a journal," illustrates the physical unburial and reburial of her father, which Gordon tries to pull across as an emotional closure to her investigation. However, imagery of marriage and proclamations that love is stronger than death cast a doubt upon the validity of her closure. One wonders whether Gordon's search for her father's identity has been resolved.

Parent/Child relationships are complicated to analyze, and many books have been written on the subject. If we wish to understand how a daughter's feminist identity developed through her relationship with her mother, a considerable number of texts can be referenced. See the bibliography in Suzanna Danuta Walter's book, *Lives Together/World's Apart*, for a myriad of these references. If we wish to understand how a daughter's feminist identity developed through the relationship with her father, however, there are considerably less resources available. Looking through the bibliography of Victoria Secunda's book, *Women and their Fathers*, we see fewer pointers to texts on the subject of fathers and daughters. Even within Secunda's book, the word "feminism" does not appear in the index. Therefore we enter into a complicated and mysterious realm. How should we relate a daughter's feminist identity to her relationship with her father? In addition, when a child experiences traumatic events involving either parent, such as divorce or death, the analysis of the child's relationship with that parent becomes even more complicated. "Losing a father in childhood forever changes the shape of a daughter's identity - how she views the world and herself. Not only is her connection to the first and most important man in her life sharply curtailed or extinguished but all her perceptions, all her decisions, all her future relationships are filtered through that early, unimaginable, ineffable loss" (Secunda, 195). It is difficult to parse out which factors in the parent/child relationships clearly map to the construction of a daughter's feminist identity. Mary Gordon experienced the death of her father when she was seven years old, and his presence/absence clearly impacted her life. She wrote an entire memoir on the subject of his identity. But what remains to be said about Gordon's identity and the development of her feminist ideals in relation to her father is less clear. *The Shadow Man* paints an elaborate picture of Gordon's father. Through this we are expected to understand Mary Gordon as her own person.

Who is Mary Gordon? Who does she pretend to be? In *The Shadow Man*, she claims she is a writer, a mother, a leftist, a catholic (Gordon, xix). She is a traveller, a reader, someone who enjoys eating candy (Gordon, 136). So far these things seem normal. There is no reason to question her identity as "a daughter who is a feminist" (Gordon, xix). Gordon portrays herself as a strong woman throughout her book. She can spend hours researching, she takes trips around the country, she raises her children, she teaches. Yet, "at the

age of forty-four, I discover I am not the person I thought I am" (Gordon, xiii). And indeed we the readers discover throughout *The Shadow Man* that she is right, Mary Gordon is not the person she thought she was. First, we might notice inconsistency if we analyze the religious element of her life. Throughout the book, Gordon illustrates her Catholicism quite clearly to the reader. She makes it very clear that she cannot relate to the Jewishness within her, as part of her father's Jewish blood. "I would have had to be braver... to think of belonging to, the Jews, my father's people... if he didn't want it for himself, if he worked so hard to separate himself, surely he wouldn't have wanted Jewishness for me" (Gordon, 20). By the end of the book, however, she has no problem identifying herself with this culture. "I note with sadness that my father and I will not be buried among Jews" (Gordon, 265). Suddenly this identification with the Jewish culture has become acceptable to her. Does she consider herself a Jew or a Catholic now? If we can question her identity as a devout Catholic, are we justified in questioning her identity as a feminist?

Her continuing contradictory portrayal of herself illustrates through strong examples that Mary Gordon is not who she thinks she is in regards to her feminist practice. Not once throughout *The Shadow Man* does Gordon acknowledge this contradiction. For a woman who claims to be a feminist, she puts forth an excessive amount of time in her life towards the subservience to one man. Gordon writes *The Shadow Man* so that she can memorialize this man, her father. The book pays tribute to his existence. The extent to which she describes her subservience to her father is the reason I question her claim to feminism. Mary Gordon states it best when she writes "feeding my children, listening to their stories, making love beneath the body of a man he could not have imagined, I am always my father's daughter" (Gordon, xxiv). In fact, she considers this to be the most defining element of herself. "My father died when I was seven years old. I've always thought that this was the most important thing that anyone could know about me" (Gordon, xiv). We cannot know who Mary Gordon is without understanding the intensity with which this statement is made true. At times, her book tells some hurtful truths about her father's character. Each time she makes such a discovery, Gordon points out that she lost the father her memory entombed. However, she quickly rebuilds a new father, justifies his actions, pulls him back into her web of adoration. "I have lost him, once, twice, I will have him forever. He is always with me, always mine" (Gordon, xxiv). Most of the narrative proclaims again and again that her father is the most important thing in her life, that she is nothing without him. Her existence is defined by this man. It is subservient to this man, it is a perfect example of a woman giving in to, and accepting, the patriarchal society we live in. Even right down to the last moment, when she decides to have his bones moved to a new grave, she upholds the roles of a male dominated world. "I even had his remains moved from the grave of my mother's family to a new grave, where he can be a patriarch, the head of a family he never saw" (Gordon, xxiii). What does it mean to be a feminist then? If a person claims an identity yet acts in opposition to that identity, who do they become?

In order to search for any existence of the feminism in Mary Gordon's life, it is important to take a look at how her mother plays into the story of her life. She sparsely mentions her mother throughout the book, until we reach the later chapters. When Gordon first introduces her, it is not an introduction to a loving mother, rather to a devoted Catholic and a polio victim. The first reference to her mother takes place within the introduction. "She, a polio victim" is described as the reason her father could not have more children" (Gordon, xvii). Right from the beginning, Gordon portrays her mother as the enemy, the woman who took something away from her father, something he wanted. For the first half of the book, her mother takes backstage in Gordon's life. "People often ask me, 'But where was your mother in all this?' I don't know what to say. She was there, of course. And yet she wasn't with us. I don't know where she was" (Gordon, 205). Eventually, she embeds one chapter in *The Shadow Man* about her mother, amidst this tribute to her father. Despite the efforts of the chapter to portray her mother in a positive light, it becomes quite obvious that Gordon does not like this woman. She not only sees her mother as the major obstacle, the thing that keeps her from having all the love of her father, but she is disgusted by her. There are continual stabs at her mother followed directly by justifications for her father. "My desire, my need to punish my mother is very great. I am conscious of no need to punish my father" (Gordon, 220). "I am ashamed, as a woman, that when I say the words 'my mother's body,' I have feelings of revulsion, and when I say 'my father's body,' I have feelings of joy and peace" (Gordon, 221). As a feminist, how can she reject her mother so strongly? Does she ever celebrate her mother for being a woman, for her strength, for raising a small child despite losing her husband, for going on with her life despite her disability? Instead, she speaks of her mother's rot,

her lost memory, her hopeless, damaged body. What sort of feminist would spend an entire book justifying her father's insanities and yet write an entire chapter in disgust of her mother?

Mary Gordon accepts patriarchy enough times within *The Shadow Man* that she nearly forces her readers to question her feminist identity. As a woman in her forties who lost her father as a child, she remains oddly obsessed by his existence. "But is it you, really, whose indulgence I ask? Or is it my father, whom I lost and found again" (Gordon, xxiv). As a so-called feminist, Gordon remains too subservient to her father to have rejected patriarchy from her life. I cannot sit and read the book without feeling disgusted by her claim to be a feminist. I feel as though Mary Gordon works very hard to cover her tracks, to put up a front, to mask her denial. Had Gordon acknowledged these contradictions somewhere in her book, I might find room to forgive her, to have compassion for the loss she suffered with her father's death. But nowhere in *The Shadow Man* does Gordon recognize this problem. Nowhere does she address the impact her father's influences have had upon her feminist identity. *The Shadow Man* is a very complicated book and it offers an interesting insight to the mind of its author. Insights which continue to force analysis and a strong skepticism of the life of Mary Gordon. Perhaps the book is an inaccurate account of this woman's life, perhaps I cannot truly be fair with my analysis until I read her other works. But I hope to think that as a writer who claims such a bold identity, the identity of a feminist, she would be a bit more careful to carry her convictions throughout all of her work and life.

## Works Cited

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Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests. Learn more about feminism. Author of Institutional Capital: Building Post-Communist Government Performance. See Article History. Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. Although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.