

# Teaching Tip



## Moon Palace

### Background information

*Below is a short summary, as well as interpretation suggestions for this novel by Paul Auster. Obviously, it won't be possible in these few pages to cover every aspect of a very complex story. This holds true for your lessons on **Moon Palace**, too – don't try to cover everything. In fact, your students will already be familiar with a fair number of things mentioned in the novel. Most importantly, make sure that both the reading and the teaching experience is one that you all enjoy.*

### Novel summary

In *Moon Palace*, there are three main storylines and three central characters – Marco Stanley Fogg, Solomon Barber and Thomas Effing. The narrator is MS Fogg, but there are other 'voices' in the novel, too. Marco starts writing down his story more than 20 years after some of the events have taken place. This book is split into seven chapters. Here are some of the most important points covered in each chapter:

1. Marco tells us about his family – his mother died when he was only a boy. He never had a father. His Uncle Victor, who raised him, died while Marco was still at college. Marco is running out of money, goes hungry, loses his flat and eventually ends up living in Central Park.
2. The narrator MS Fogg talks about his time in the park and about how Zimmer, his former flatmate, and Kitty Wu, a girl he once met by chance, saved his life.
3. MS Fogg lives with Zimmer and gradually recovers. He is declared unfit for military service in Vietnam – a result of his physical and mental exhaustion. Later, he realises that Kitty Wu is in love with him, and they become lovers. At the end of this last chapter, Marco manages to find a job looking after an old man in a wheelchair, Thomas Effing.
4. Effing is an extremely odd man. Marco reads to him, pushes him about New York in his wheelchair, and eventually Effing tells Marco about his life. He wants Marco to write his obituary for him. Midway through the novel, Marco is sent to the Brooklyn Museum to study *Moonlight*, a painting by Ralph Albert Blakelock.
5. Effing tells the second part of his story. His real name is Julian Barber, and he used to be a famous painter. When he went out west he was dogged by bad luck, lost his companion and ended up in a cave. This is where he lived for some time, painted, and eventually killed three criminals who had murdered the former inhabitant of the cave. With their stolen money, he started a new life using a new name. One evening, Effing is mysteriously attacked, and as a result becomes paralysed. Marco Fogg is told to work out three different 'obituaries' from these accounts. Effing dies on the very day he had himself predicted, May 12th.

6. Effing has left Marco some money, and Kitty and Marco lead a happy life in Chinatown. Marco meets Solomon Barber, Effing's son, who is a professor of history. Eventually we (and Marco) learn that Barber is Marco's father and Effing was really Marco's grandfather. Barber had had an affair with Marco's mother when she was a student in one of his history classes. We learn about Barber's childhood and get to know the plot of his awful novel 'Kepler's Blood'. Kitty is pregnant but wants to have an abortion. Marco and Kitty split up, and Barber wants to take Marco on an expedition out west to find Effing's cave.
7. Barber tries unsuccessfully to bring Marco and Kitty back together again. On their way west they visit Emily's (Marco's mother) and his Uncle Victor's graves in Chicago. Here, Marco realises that Barber is really his father. He gets terribly angry. Barber falls into an open grave and breaks his back. After two months Barber dies and is buried next to Emily Fogg. Marco now continues the expedition, only to find that Effing's cave has been flooded by what is now Lake Powell. His inheritance of ten thousand dollars gets stolen and, in an act of defiance, Marco starts walking west. At the end of the novel, he reaches the Pacific, a sadder and a wiser man, and sits on the beach waiting for the full moon to rise 'and find her place in the darkness'.

## About the main characters

- The major drawback of the novel is that there are 'no' female protagonists. Auster concentrates instead on the three male characters and shows how their lives were influenced by a multitude of contingencies. There are numerous parallels between son, father and grandfather. They are all 'outsiders', 'oddballs': in short they do not adhere to what is considered by the majority to be 'normal behavior'. People around them think that they have all 'fucked up' their lives. All three go through a series of ups and downs in their lives. Marco, the narrator, tells us that his life really began when he reached the Pacific – but can we trust him? Has he really managed to become a different person (if he ever was a real person, that is)?  
**Suggestion:** You and your students can do an interactive character study of Marco: for homework, have your students write down questions that they would like to ask Marco, and then enter the classroom the next day and pretend to be Marco. Students will then have the opportunity to ask him questions on his life, his behaviour, his friends and relationships etc. .

## What does it all mean?

- This novel encourages many interpretations and conclusions. Many people have commented on the fact that Marco cannot really be considered a role model, and thus consider the novel to be unsuitable for classroom use. My students have commented on this fact, too. More importantly, however, when my students were asked to explain what they have learnt from *Moon Palace*, they said that one thought central to the novel was entirely new to them, and they think it is a valuable piece of advice: you cannot plan your life down to every minute detail. Instead you must be ready for coincidences and unexpected twists of fate; coming to terms with your life really means being able to redraw your plans as necessary. This is indeed evidence that the students seem to have discovered a set of essential questions found not only in Auster's novels, but in much of American literature: who am I, where do I stand, where are my roots, where do I come from and where am I going? How big a part do I actually play or need to play in my development? If a novel can achieve this result in our students, what else could we teachers possibly ask for?