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OF APES AND MEN

THEMES AND NARRATIVE PATTERNS IN "APELAND"

Apeland¹ is the first novel of a young writer, Paul Allen, who was born in West Virginia in 1948 but spent most of his youth in Florida, a region which figures prominently in all his writing.² In the vivid sense of place he conveys as well as in his concentration on basic human emotions, violence and death, Allen is indebted to the Southern “Gothic” tradition. Though he has literary models, he also draws upon his own experiences of life in the Florida swamps.³ Like the novelists he has been compared to—William Faulkner and James Dickey—he is bent on transcending the regional limitations of his setting and plot paraphernalia. Equally important, he is developing his own individual style and vision of life. Although most reviewers acclaimed the novel for its artistic qualities, there was an unfortunate tendency to market the paperback edition for its sensational rather than literary values. For all the violence described, however, Apeland is not a mere thriller about the accidental killing of a fourteen year old boy during the hunt for a gorilla. The novel asserts its claim to a serious critical analysis. Allen’s interest is not focussed on the horror elements themselves, but on the characters’ emotions at moments of extreme stress, which, as Flannery O’Connor claimed, “best reveal what we are essentially.”⁴


² Before Apeland, he wrote several short stories, most of which have not appeared in print, but which I had an opportunity of reading in manuscript. The short story “Mangroves” was published in “The Smith”, Special Issue No. 26, Jan. 30, 1973, pp. 3—9.

³ He had worked as a construction labourer himself; his family had, like the Bisases, for years shared a house with two grandmothers; and he had spent days hunting in the woods with his father.

“Apeland”, in its literal meaning, is the name of a rundown roadside menagerie in Florida, which is the central place of action. The title, however, is also meant as a metaphor for the human beasts of prey, who seem to be more reckless and brutal than animals. Trapped in the bleak routine of their lives, Allen’s characters vainly aspire to romance and adventure, seizing at any promise of distraction and thrill, no matter how violent or destructive.

... it gets so damn boring and hot here, you just want something to happen for excitement—a hurricane, a fight, anything... (p. 68)

The excitement they were pining for comes when a love-starved gorilla called Margaret escapes from her cage into the jungle. For the members of the posse the ensuing hunt becomes a surrogate for the heroic adventures each of them wishes to enact, a quest for manhood and superiority (comparable to the hunting mystique in Faulkner’s The Bear and Dickey’s Deliverance). The stalking of Margaret creates a welter of sexual tension, a tension which can only be quelled in an orgiastic release of pent-up violence. The hunting and killing scenes are reminiscent of Faulkner’s descriptions of lynching crowds and of the stimulation of mass excitement into a murderous frenzy. As in Light in August, for instance, the horror of the action partly arises from the “absurd disproportion”5 between the caliber of the commonplace—even comical—characters and the violence they are capable of committing or generating. There is a fundamental incongruity between their stature and their evil potential, a problem which seems to fascinate Paul Allen as it did William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor.

Allen expertly structures his material and times his effects. After devoting three chapters to a description of the delapidated Apeland zoo and taxidermy, where crazy Mrs. Cornfield has her cat stuffed, he introduces the main characters, Ed Bias, his family, and his enemy Gaylord Miller. The Biases came to Florida in search of a picture-postcard paradise; they end up in a shack with two widowed grandmothers. Ed works as a construction overseer for Yankee contractors he dislikes, venting his frustrations on the fat worker Miller, who tries to provoke him. Throughout these eight chapters a dismal atmosphere of hatred and brutality is established, into which the Florida setting is skilfully included by expressions such as “green violence of the woods” (p. 22) or “the...sun sparkled meanly at their backs” (p. 128). Miller’s gruesome ketchup-bottle murder of his wife is the most extreme among several other manifestations of senseless aggression, different in degree, though hardly in qual-

ity, from Ed’s indiscriminate hatred. Ed, too, can only resort to violence to reassert himself.

Eddie’s hand shot out, knuckles smashed into Oscar’s cheek. The boy’s head bumped on the side window. “Goddam it now, boy,” said Eddie, gritting teeth, feeling the power he had missed for days (p. 191).

The next thematic unit, again consisting of eight chapters and concerned with the hunt for the escaped gorilla, gives a detailed picture of the hectic preparations at Apeland, the tedious drudgery in the jungle and the bloody climax. In this section, when the men meet the beast on its own ground, the metaphor of an “Apeland” is especially potent and impressive. The central passages, describing the accidental shooting of Ed’s son T. and the drowning of Margaret, are told in an original, dynamic style already employed in the murder scene; Allen strings together exclamations and flashes of impression, giving the narrative immense drive and immediacy.

A body fell, a small body, blood dripping, bounced off branches, splattered in the leaves. “Myyyyyyyyyyyyy! Sonnnnnnnnn!” Eddie screamed. “Myyyyyyyy sonnnnnnnnn!” he screamed, chest wet with son’s blood, hugging him, men dashed past. “Get the cocksucker.” said Miller, running faster, past sheriff, Oscar down by T., looked, looked, looked up at men pursuing, started to rise to join them, dropped, a father whimpering over a son, Oscar looked after the men disappearing (p. 180).

Though this style may well be indebted to that of Faulkner for the presentation of an experience in one long sentence, it is also original in tone, relying more strongly on alliteration and lacking the mannerism of repetition obvious in many of Faulkner’s descriptions.

The mules dived up again diving their legs stiff their stiff legs rolling slow and...he had her under the water coming in to the bank coming in slow because in the water she fought to stay under the water...

Not even the disaster of T.’s death, however, can sober the protagonists; the killing of both T. and Margaret gives rise to new resentments, which, after three final chapters, find their bloody conclusion in an almost Jacobean slaughter when Ed and Miller shoot each other and Apeland goes up in flames.

In its outline, the story draws upon the cliché of a quest to hunt down a dangerous enemy in the wilderness, which is frequently used in Western and adventure movies. Such films tend to follow a hackneyed pat-

tern, involving the escape—or invasion—of an enemy; the formation of a dare-devil posse; an excessively long and dangerous hunt taking its toll in human life; the heroic accomplishment of the task at great personal risk; and the final confrontation of the antagonists, long impending but delayed till the end of the story. Allen, who studied film production himself, parodies and deflates this cliché: the enemy tracked down is a love-starved ape; the posse is made up of a “band of baboons” (p. 151) and dwindles because of incompetence and cowardice; the heroic task consists in drowning an exhausted and frightened gorilla and costs the life of a boy because the “sportsmen” are unable to aim their rifles properly; the shoot-out between Ed and Miller is a tragic parody of the “Lone Ranger” and “Tex Ritter” Westerns, which the Biases are so fond of watching. The use of this worn-out pattern thus dramatizes the daydreams of the protagonists, who actually experience their predicaments in terms of such stereotype movie adventures.

Another film myth Allen obviously exploits is that of King Kong, who, like Margaret, is a beast half frightening and half tender. Like Ernest Schoedsack, Allen elicits sympathy for the plight of the gorilla, who falls victim to human brutality. The parallels are, however, most obvious in the sexual attraction both apes feel for their human captives. They gaze at their faces with rapture and seize them into their arms, carrying them away into the jungle. The agonizing climax when Margaret takes hold of T. is seen in exclusively sexual terms, echoing Oscar’s love-making and T.’s sexual fantasies almost verbatim.

she put her arms around my waist... hands held out to embrace...

she... hugged me real tight...

kissing me all over the face...

she hugged him...

a kiss so strong...

her face pressed to his...

The beast saw only... the shining limp hair.

he had time just to concentrate on her

I rubbed her hair. (pp. 50f.)

...as he looked into


8 This passage also bears some resemblance to O’Connor’s story “Greenleaf”, where the animal, a black bull, is also seen in terms of a sexual aggressor. Although Allen never endows the gorilla with a mythic significance, the similarities in description are noteworthy:

“When he turned back Margaret took him. She ran up through the twisted oaks, waddling fast, hands held out to embrace. He did not scream... She came to him, hugged him, he went loose in her arms; her face pressed to his, forced his limply back” (p. 178).

“She looked back and saw that the bull, his head lowered, was racing toward her. She remained perfectly still... She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her... and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart, and the other one curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip”. Flannery O’Connor, The Complete Stories, New York 1974, p. 333.
her face... (p. 84) face...

she... had a funny walk almost a limp. waddling fast... (p. 178)

(p. 123)

Again, however, Allen parodies his model. The aggressor is a female
gorilla, wooed like a coy beauty by her pursuers, and the role of Fay
Wray, the archetypal virgin in distress, is turned into that of a virgin
boy fantasizing about a girl friend.

The moral ambiguities of the film, however, are sustained and, indeed,
enlarged. Like King Kong's death, Margaret's drowning by Miller is
charged with a significance far exceeding the killing of an ape and bears
overtones of a homicide. It recalls both Miller's fantasies about his wife's
corpse rolling in the sea and the murder scene, where the emphasis is
also focussed on the head and face of the victim, who seems to resign
herself to her fate. A similar descriptive device links in the reader's mind
Miller's fatal shot through T.'s right temple with the smashing of his
wife's temple, thus incriminating Miller with a second murder, even
though no clue as to his intention is given. The same moral ambiguity
is achieved with regard to Oscar's shot by making it a tragic reversal
of T.'s half-serious threats to shoot Oscar, by his grandmother's insinu-
ations ("Honey, you didn't mean to shoot your brother, did you"), and
by his enigmatic admission.

"Was it worth it, do you think?" asked Eddie, hating as he asked... Oscar's face
fell in sadness. A long sigh escaped his hanging lips. "Yeah" (p. 199).

The moral dilemma the reader is faced with brings to mind a similar
incident in Hemingway's "Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber", where
it is also left open whether the shot killing the protagonist was fired at
him or at the attacking buffalo.

The question of moral judgment is raised throughout the novel: Allen
makes all values seem equivocal and all classifications precarious in order
to emphasize the intricacy and dubiety of human emotions and eval-
uations. He radically questions the reader's response by counterpointing
gratuitous violence with boisterous black humour similar to the grotesque
comedy of Flannery O'Connor's descriptions. There is, for instance, a strik-
ing resemblance in the cruel humour with which both authors treat the
plight of cripples who have lost their artificial limbs. Miller's agony is
as mercilessly derided as Hulga's frantic attempt, in "Good Country
People", to regain her wooden leg from the man she tried to seduce.

Miller... fell with a splash into the mud. ... Miller's false foot had come off and
the stub pranced in the water. He struggled up, tore at the floor mats, heaved them
over his head in the rain. "I can't find the cocksucker. I can't find the cocksucker",
Miller repeated, turning, swinging his body from side to side. He searched around
him in the mud for his foot. (p. 201).
"Give me my leg", she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily. ... "Give me my leg!" she screeched. He jumped up... She saw him grab the leg... "I've gotten a lot of interesting things", he said. "One time I've gotten a woman's glass eye that way."

Apeland has been called a "drama that probes the instinctive violence in man as well as beast". As is suggested by the ambiguous title, the human and animal spheres are closely linked throughout the book. The kinship between man and beast is suggested not only by the characters' repeated use of invectives such as "sow", "hog" or "monkey", and frequent references to feces and entrails, but, more importantly, by similar behaviour patterns in similar situations. Monroe Block, the Apeland tour guide, whips his dog, the gorilla kills it; Block kills the ants, the ants kill a chimp baby. Of both Margaret and the men it is said they "hoot" (pp. 64, 156), and the terms "cell crazy" (p. 30) and "fuck crazy" (p. 116) are applicable to the apes and the boys. One of the most haunting visual images is the description of dead T., hung by two ropes like a quarry, having, indeed, become the "intelligent prey" (p. 176) the men set out to hunt. His fate is shared by Margaret, who is also killed and hung from a tree.

Yet Allen's vision is more complex than this disparaging picture of animalism might imply. For all their ferocious passions and animal violence, the characters are never presented as wholly depraved or despicable. They are both capable and in need of love and understanding, but they are ashamed of accepting the affection awkwardly offered to them, and they lack perseverance and responsibility in their own emotional commitments. Even the positive values in the book are therefore ambivalent and inconclusive. Ed's love of his sons is devalued by his inability to show them his affection.

The only things he had that were of worth were his sons... His sons were not going to be like him. He had seen to that. He had avoided them as much as possible. (p. 57).

Block's friendship for Ed and his gratitude for his aid against the brutal Miller is qualified by Block's unreflected callousness in jostling against his dying friend when picking up his gun. Margaret, too, is capable of touching gentleness — for instance when she cradles T. in her arms — and of extreme violence — when she tears the dog to pieces or when she bites off Miller's leg.

Happiness, in this world, seems to be the paradoxical privilege of Mrs. Cornfield's stuffed cat and of the dead gorilla, who are the only creatures described in exclusively positive terms.

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Its [Kitty’s] eyes forever fixed in merry luminence, looked out upon the world in utter stupefied innocence (p. 6).

She floated face up, legs and arms spread, a pleasant expression, dead, as though accepting it all (p. 183).

In this context the “smile” (p. 6, 182) on the faces of the stuffed cat and the dead ape is important; men only grin (pp. 25, 129, 149, 173, 190, 207, 210) and leer at each other.

Divisions, however, are never clear-cut in the book and options are not easily to be taken. If the cat is “merry”, it is also dead; it lacks exactly that heat, symbol of life, which is such a curse to the inhabitants of the swampy area. If coolness is welcome in this climate, it is also introduced in contexts clearly referring to death, such as the mounted cat, the cold barrel of the shot-gun (p. 205) and the cool breeze reaching Ed through his failing senses when he is dying (p. 211). Coolness is usually connected with rain, which may be welcome for its freshness but unpleasant when it impedes work and leaks through the house. Dryness, on the other hand, while implying shelter, also conjures up memories of the dry sand of the cemetery (p. 187). The same duality is palpable in the opposition of light and darkness. Light is usually uncomfortable (pp. 7, 14, 40, 142, 161, 163, 201), but it can also be reassuring morning light after the endless black hours in the woods. If darkness soothes the eyes and is connected with a happier past (p. 41), it is also linked with the impenetrable, hostile jungle and with Margaret, who is an equivocal symbol herself.

Allen mocks at pulp literature, with its romantic presentation of life and ridiculous simplifications, which the protagonists of Apeland fail to apprehend.

The family watched a serialized Tex Ritter movie. ... He lay struggling on a bed, wearing his ridiculous ten-gallon hat and large white socks. But the family saw nothing humorous as Tex escaped to the range, walking carefully in his socks over rocks. He removed the rope binding him by letting his horse chew through it. ... Soon he was pointing his rifle at the bad man. The extended report of the gun echoed in the box canyon and the foe fell (p. 92).

Allen’s attitude, in this respect, is radically different from that of Dickey in Deliverance, whose protagonists seem to gain strength and motivation from their identification with movie idols. For Allen’s characters their dependence on such unrealistic models proves fatal in a world that defies naive definitions. In Western movies it is easy to know “who [is] right and who [is] wrong” (p. 57), but the characters, mesmerized by the crude ideology suggested to them by their cultural environment, find it impossible to apply such clear-cut categories in their own lives.
This impressive complexity is also perceptible in the title of the novel. The application of the name “Apeland” to the destitute human menagerie is in complete accordance with the pattern of parallels between man and animal. Yet even the metaphor itself is ambiguous: it is both derogatory and full of tragic irony in being symbolic of the negative view the characters have of themselves. They regard themselves as failures and despise their fellow-men. However, their struggles for security in life and their attempts to make sense of a seemingly futile existence are never portrayed as mean and unheroic. Allen leaves the reader complete freedom to judge for himself, even in the interpretation of the title.