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RIOT AS RITUAL: ANN PETRY'S "IN DARKNESS AND CONFUSION"

One of the most noteworthy examples of sociology transformed into art is Ann Petry's story, "In Darkness and Confusion" (1947),¹ which recreates the Harlem riot of 1943² and foreshadows studies like those of the Kerner Commission.³ What is most striking about the story, however, is that within the narrative itself a similar transformation occurs. What begins as a riot ends as a traumatic experience which transmutes the inarticulate and patient protagonist into an enraged and aggressive one. The transformation thus moves beyond the levels of sociological awareness and psychological response to the level of archetypal participation, in which, through rites of passage, an innocent is initiated into the communal experience of the culture.

In accord with the implicit theme of riot as ritual initiation into the mysteries of the community, the transformation in the Black protagonist, William Jones, is presented in terms of darkness and confusion. Before the riot, "darkness" refers to the sociological fact of William's skin color and the ghetto dwelling which his blackness had forced him to rent; psychologically, "darkness" describes the condition of ignorance and restricted awareness which is the result of William's sociological circumstances. The range of William's ignorance is wide. For example, he is not aware, on the eventful Saturday morning before the riot, that the summer heat is raising the level of irritability of the whole ghetto, although he perceives the heat himself (p. 162).⁴ He does not know, until later in the day, that his son, Sam, has been shot and arrested (pp. 172-173). He does not understand why his adopted daughter, Annie May, once a "nice little girl," is so rebellious (p. 163) and he does not know what she does with herself when she is not working (p. 164). He cannot think what to write to Sam, away in the army (p. 166). He is not sure whether or not Sam at 16 "had already explored the possibilities" offered by the "bold-eyed women" of the ghetto (p. 167).

In short, William's life had not allowed him either the education or the leisure to become reflective, to philosophize on his condition, which means that he has not allowed himself to develop what Grier and Cobbs call the "black rage"⁵ which comes from the Black man's consciousness of his condition.

That consciousness is in large part sociological, an awareness of milieu. William does in fact respond to certain characteristics of his surroundings: the "startlingly black" skin of his wife, Pink,⁶ the "dark thin hands" of Annie May, the "hallways so dark that he knew if he wasn't careful he'd walk over a step" (p. 165) in contrast to the "brilliant sunlight outside," the dangerous streets where "at night shadowy, vague shapes emerged from the street's darkness, lurking near the trees" (p. 167). But William cannot put these perceptions into an analytical framework or draw a systematic conclusion from them. At most he can come to a desperate decision: "We gotta move this time for sure" (p. 167). And he certainly cannot be aware of the defense mechanisms he uses to protect himself against the hostile white society, mechanisms based upon the values of that society. For example, he never thinks of himself as "boy" or "Willie" or "Bill", but always "William",⁷ he is always on time to work, he works hard, and he never misses a day. He is conscientious father and husband, and wants Annie May to be "good" and responsible (p. 169). He wants to move to a better neighborhood. And he is determined that Sam is going to earn a living "wearing a starched white collar, and a shine on his shoes and a crease in his pants" (p. 165); a likely career, William thinks, is "a druggist instead of a doctor or a lawyer," (p. 169), so long as Sam "could make enough to have good clothes and a nice home" (p. 168).⁸

If William is unable to make sociological analyses, he is even more incapable of noticing symbolic patterns in his life, such as the recurrence of darkness at

periods of stress. Such moments occur when William worries about Annie May's "staying out practically all night long" (p. 163) and about his wife's bad heart (during his walk through the dark hallways, p. 165), when he remembers Sam's graduation on "a warm June night" (p. 165) or Pink's fears about Sam in Georgia (expressed "one night," p. 166), when he attempts "one night" to write Sam a letter (p. 166), when he is alarmed by the "shadowy, vague shaped" which emerge from the ghetto darkness (p. 167), when he is depressed after work at "eight o'clock that night" (p. 170), and when he discovers later in the barbershop that Sam is in jail (p. 172). All of William's life, in short, is bounded and circumscribed by the darkness of his skin, his milieu, his mood, and his fate.

Closely linked to the thematic function of darkness is the thematic use of confusion. William's confusion is of two kinds, psychological and sociological. On the personal level, he cannot cope with Annie May's change from "good little girl" to "Jezebel," and he alternates among worry about it (p. 163), frustrated threats of punishment (p. 164), false analysis (p. 164), and physical action (the ejection of Annie May from the house, p. 175). His confusion is manifested in his inability to articulate what he dimly perceives or deeply feels but cannot analyze. For example, all he can say to Pink the Saturday before the riot is "Hot, ain't it?" He is nonplussed by Annie May's silent rebelliousness, and finally can only say, "You know you ain't too big to get your butt whipped" (p. 164). Earlier, with great effort, he had penned a brief letter to Sam: "Is you all right? Your Pa" (p. 166). The maximum of confusion came with a direct confrontation with the oppressive white society, when William encountered Annie May's teacher and was "buried under a flow of words" which left him "confused and embarrassed" (p. 170). When he does articulate his analyses, the conclusions he draws are clichés dictated by his society. He can talk freely in the Black barbershop but his comments are obvious ones based upon limited and generalized opinions ("Them Japs ain't got a chance"). His conclusion about Annie May is equally trite and predictable; like the girls who come into the drugstore with

"Too much lipstick" and "Their dresses... too short and too tight" (p. 169), she has gone bad, become a "Jezebel," given up her sense of morality and her sound familial and social values.

William's conception of sound values represents his greatest confusion. As I suggested earlier in describing William's defense mechanisms, all his values are white, handed to him ready-made. We can see his value-system at work in his self-image ("William"), his characterization of Annie May as worthless because she will not work regularly (p. 169), his failure to react when his employer calls him "Boy" (p. 166), his dislike at living in a neighborhood of brothels and bars, and his rejection of Pink's continued church-going. More importantly, we can see William's introjection of white middle-class values in his plans for Sam. In William's fantasies "Sam wasn't going to earn his living with a mop and broom" but with a "starched white collar" as befitted a young man who had "made the basketball team in high school" and whose picture "had been in one of the white papers" (p. 173). Ann Petry subtly points out the unreality of William's vision by counterpointing to William's "white" illusions the Black reality which William is subconsciously aware of. He is afraid that Sam had already begun to find his place in the world defined by him by whites. At sixteen he apparently had already "explored the possibilities" of the brothels (p. 167), he worked as a redcap at Grand Central (p. 165), he is going to a Black college, Lincoln (p. 165), he can become a "druggist instead of a doctor or a lawyer" (p. 119), and he is in a Georgia army camp. Reinforcing the reality which Sam, and to a certain extent William, has accepted, is the reality which William unconsciously perceives but hopes, vainly, to reject, e.g. the ghetto apartment, the eight-to-eight menial job, the "limp work coat" in contrast to Mr. Yudkin's "crisp white laboratory coat" (p. 169), and the natural community in the Black barbershop. In short, William's whole world is defined by his plans for Sam, but that this is a fantasy world is made clear by what happens to Sam and the riot it triggers, a concrete realization of the confusion of values in William's mind.

But because he is ignorant and confused we are not to take William as obtuse or to reject him as too imperceptive to carry the value-statement of the author. On the contrary, Ann Petry is very careful to define William's problem as perceptions without a means to analyze or define them and frustrations without a means to articulate them or act them out. This repressed locked in psychological and sociological condition, this darkness and confusion, is a necessary cause and justification for William's activities as a rioter. It is only by an event which goes deeper than riotous reaction, that is, an event which brings William in touch with the deepest desires of his community, that William can begin to articulate and act upon his accumulated if unconscious knowledge of his condition. To emphasize William's metamorphosis, Ann Petry created a tripartite narrative structure which juxtaposes William as puzzled novice, William as initiate, and William as active member of the new life.

His false value-system is represented by the events of Saturday, which occur in three major segments. As usual, William rises early to cook his breakfast; but this morning is different: it is extremely hot, he ruins his breakfast, and he has an argument with Annie May. This opening segment ends with the empty mailbox and William's walk down depressing Harlem streets (pp. 161-168). The second segment begins with William at his menial chores from eight in the morning to eight at night. It ends with the scene in the barbershop, where Sam's friend Scummy reports that Sam, refusing to move to "the nigger end of a bus," had been shot by a white MP and then imprisoned for twenty years for shooting back (pp. 169-174). In the third and last segment (pp. 174-177), William goes home to the heat and smell of the ghetto and, after a quarrel with Annie May, goes to sleep so that he will not have to tell Pink about Sam.

Throughout the Saturday section of the narrative Ann Petry carefully lays the psychological and sociological groundwork for William's transformation into rioter. Within the stifling atmosphere of the hot, stinking, violent ghetto William stores up a dangerous complex of past and present experiences: Annie May's smart-aleck rebelliousness, Pink's failing health, the

dark tenement apartment, Pink's crying at Sam's departure for Georgia, which "tore him in little pieces," Mr. Yudkin's snarl, "Boy, what the hell's the matter with you," the futile search for better housing, his mother's comment on Georgia ("They hate niggers down there"), the episode with Annie May's white teacher, the news about Sam, the urge to stand up in church and yell. Thus, William comes to the night of the riot in a state of acute tension and resentment. He is ready for riot.

The events of Sunday are balanced against those of Saturday. In the morning segment (pp. 177-179) William stays home while Pink goes to church; he meditates on Sam, suffers from the heat, and watches the random violence of the ghetto. The first segment ends with his decision, "I gotta get me some beer." The second segment begins in the bar, where William is caught up in the undirected, restless energy of the crowd, the loud jukebox, the loveless sexuality, the false joviality of drunkenness. But under this influence he begins talking aloud to himself, musing on Sam's probable future ("whoring" on Sunday afternoon). Like segment one, the second segment ends with violence, the shooting of a Black soldier by a white policeman. Aroused by the beer and the symbolic connection between the shooting of Sam and the shooting of the soldier, William spontaneously says, "Come on, what are you waiting for?" and leads the crowd outside (pp. 179-181). The third segment (pp. 181-186) deals with the increasing anger of the crowd and William's increasing identification with it: "He got the feeling that he had lost his identity as a person with a free will of his own" (p. 182). At first he is frightened, but then "he began to feel powerful"; an important indication of his growing sense of communal power is his speaking to himself and his Black brothers. A meaningful component of this articulation of power is his social commentary: "They got us coming and going, he thought" (p. 182). And he suddenly remembers a poignant and proleptic scene of loss and pain, when Pink had lost a child; the white nurse commented that Blacks have too many children anyway, and William stared at her white face and uniform and muttered, "It's too bad your eyes ain't white, too" (p. 184). The violence (and growing perception by

William) culminates in the concluding action of the third section, when Pink, finally told of Sam's fate, throws a bottle through a plate-glass window and initiates the riot.

Pink's act concludes the first stage of William's initiation; the remaining "mysteries" are the subject of the last section of narrative (pp. 186-191). The first section (Saturday) presents William as silently impotent, closed in by his life and milieu; the second (Sunday) shows his increasing identification with his Black brothers and his progressive ability to articulate his feelings and perceptions. To this dialectic pattern of thesis - antithesis the closing pages of the narrative (Sunday night) add the synthesis of William's experiences, in which the suppressed anger and shock of Saturday is released in the communal experience of Sunday, culminating in the final blood-rites of the riot on Sunday night. And the riot is clearly a ritual requiring the shedding of blood. As Ann Petry makes clear early in the story (p. 171), William "didn't like violence," and when he notices that many of the looters (including Pink) have cut their hands during the looting (pp. 188, 190) he begins to lose his rebellious energy and wants only to return to the familiar and protective home and values which the darkness and confusion of the riot had temporarily displaced (pp. 188, 191). But William, once a participant in the ritual transformation, has to see it through.

As Sam's fate and the bloody hands of the rioters suggest, the ritual is based upon the sacrificial shedding of blood; at the same time, on the sociological and psychological levels it is the ritualized shedding of the past, that is, of false evaluations of self and society. The link between the ritual and sociological levels is the symmetrical arrangement of the protagonists. The first sacrificial victim, the young male member of the family, is Sam; his is a literal shedding of blood, both his and that of the dominant white society. Like Sam, the young female member of the family, Annie May, is symbolically killed by being arrested in the riot, to be categorized as no longer "delinquent" but "criminal." The two members on the other side of the generation gap, Pink and William, have fates

similar to that of the children. Pink, like Sam, does literally shed blood (both in the riot and in the flashback in which she loses her baby in a white hospital), and she is killed by the riot. William, in accord with his role as ritual initiate, sacrifices the most: his son is shot and jailed, he abandons his middle-class value system, he takes part in violence, and he loses his daughter and wife. In short, he undergoes a ritual transformation, completing the symmetry of the rebellious family and closing the generation gap by identifying with Sam and Annie May. When William cries aloud over the dead body of Pink, "The sons of bitches" (p. 191), the articulated expression of shock, loss, and hatred is the culmination of the ritual transformation of William into aggressive and rebellious Black.

What begins in sociology, then, ends in archetypal experience. The thematic reason for this progression is clear: Ann Petry is concerned to justify Black riots. On the sociological and psychological levels we are made to see the result of just one repressive act too many on a hot summer day in Harlem, 1943. On the archetypal level we come to understand the universal meaning of William's "riotous" act. It is not simply that he is lashing out at a repressive and dominant society, it is that he is breaking out of a mode of existence. But the physical experience, realistically, is only temporary, that is, will be nullified by further repression (including arrest) and loss (e.g., William's family), so that William's milieu is unchanged. But the Black psyche is changed; more importantly, it is oriented to communal experience, to the brotherhood of the oppressed against the oppressor. William does not feel this rationally but intuitively; it will take much longer for him to rationalize this experience, to develop an ideology for action. Therefore, his transformation is truly a ritual one; on the outside, in his body and milieu, little is changed for William. But in the realm of ritual transformation, in the universal religious experience of being born again through sacrifice into a new

(See Adams on page 60)

(Giles, continued from page 53)

Bone is correct in describing Their Eyes Were Watching God as having "abnormally low racial tension" (p. 251) in the sense that the only direct protest is in Nannie's narrative of her slavery experiences and in the hurricane scenes. However, perhaps the major underlying theme is contained in the contrast between those characters (Nannie and Jody, especially) who are so white-oriented that they measure time in a rational, materialistic way and those whose blackness is so intact that they view time emotionally and hedonistically (Tea-Cake primarily). It

is for the dominance of Janie's soul that they struggle; and Tea-Cake, or black purity, wins.

James R. Giles
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¹Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, 1968). Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (New York, 1969).

(Adams, continued from page 57)

life, of breaking through the darkness and confusion of this life into a clearly-perceived new life, William is much changed. For Ann Petry, as for William Jones, riot becomes ritual.

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Notes

¹I am using the text printed in Abraham Chapman, ed., Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature (New York, 1968), pp. 161-191.

²For another Black writer's use of the Harlem riot, see James Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955).

³Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York, 1968). A brief comment on the Harlem riot is on p. 224 of the Bantam edition.

⁴For a similar use of summer heat as one cause of violence, see Katherine Anne Porter's "Noon Wine."

⁵William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage (New York, 1968); see also Baldwin in Notes.

⁶He is also aware of the futility of her constant church-going (pp. 178-179).

⁷This is an assumption based upon the author's use of "William," but nowhere in the story in the protagonist referred to in any other way.

⁸Note also the value-judgment implied in his wife's name, "Pink."