

The Late George Apley Short Guide

The Late George Apley by John P. Marquand

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Characters

Although *The Late George Apley* includes letters from other characters for comment and counterpoint, Apley himself is the dominant character in the novel. The letters that narrate his life from childhood through maturity and old age record his devotion to the ultimately impossible task of opposing all change whatsoever. After one futile attempt at rebellion (a romance with a beautiful Irish girl named Mary Monahan), Apley conforms rigidly. His occasional excursions to New York bewilder and unnerve him. His marriage to Catharine Bosworth, a childhood friend who collects butter knives, manifests, as his father suggests, an admirable conviction that "beauty is only skin deep and there are more important elements in the holy bond of matrimony." Apley's one joy is bird watching with another childhood friend, Clara Goodrich. His inevitable defeat typifies the fate of Marquand's protagonists as they struggle against monumental environmental influences.



Social Concerns

In *The Late George Apley*, Marquand's portrayal of the stultified protagonist demonstrates how early twentieth-century Boston's caste system defeats even the well-intentioned members of the elite who devote their lives to its preservation. Without being political, Marquand emphasizes the origins of the Apley fortune in slave trading, a fortune later augmented by the exploitation of mill hands in the textile industry at Apley Falls. As in all of Marquand's novels of manners, the settings identify the direction of the satire. Among the objects of Apley's energy are the Beacon Street and Milton properties which must be preserved against mildew and Dutch elm disease and the Pequod Island Club where vacationing Brahmins recreate Boston society in a location that emphasizes their insularity. Apley and his set maintain their solidarity and insularity even when traveling in Europe.

As George writes home on his last trip, "Rome is really a delightful place, particularly when one brings one's own group with one."

Techniques

Marquand uses irony to convey his satire and point of view. In *The Late George Apley* the letters of the protagonist, undercut by the comments of the even more conservative editor, combine with the audience's knowledge of such events as the First World War and the stock market crash for dramatic irony. Apley himself is a naive narrator who is unaware of presenting himself as bumbling, insular, and, in the view of many of his fellow Bostonians (especially the Irish politicians with whom he must share control of his city), probably mad and certainly inconsequential. Both Apley, because of his naivete, and the editor Horatio Willing, because of his duplicity, are unreliable narrators. But intrusions by such characters as the Apley children are among the reliable voices that help clarify the events described with pathetic self-revelation by Apley himself.

Themes

The Late George Apley argues that provincial conservatism traps the very elitists who devote themselves most single-mindedly to preserving the status quo. George Apley's devotion to maintaining Boston social tradition results from his position as representative of a typical Brahmin family. As such, he works to defeat such signs of creeping socialism as "income tax and old age insurance," as well as such aberrations as electric signs around Boston Common and the Harvard Business School. The pattern to which Apley adheres includes graduation from Harvard, marriage to a childhood friend, membership in Boston clubs, and bringing up one's children in precisely the same mold. Through the naive irony of his own narrative, Apley emerges as foolish, sexually repressed, a figure of fun to his enemies, and an occasional embarrassment to his friends, as he surrenders his chances for vitality to his unthinking commitment to the pattern.

Adaptations

A number of Marquand's novels have become films and plays. George S. Kaufman and Marquand worked together to adapt *The Late George Apley* for Broadway production in 1947. The play ran for a year as did *Point of No Return*, dramatized in 1951 by Paul Osborn. Leland Hayward directed, and Henry Fonda starred as Charles Grey.

Films of Marquand's novels include *H. M. Pulham, Esquire* in 1941, *B. E's Daughter* in 1948, and *Melville Goodwin, USA* in 1956 under the title *Top Secret Affair*. *The Late George Apley* was filmed in 1947, and the *Mr. Moto* series over the twenty-year period between 1937 and 1957. In addition, *Sincerely, Willis Wayde* was a Playhouse 90 TV production in 1956.

Literary Precedents

The Late George Apley is most often linked with George Santayana's *The Last Puritan*, subtitled *A Novel in the Form of a Memoir* (1935), a phrase that reverses Marquand's subtitle, *A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*. Most critics believe Marquand writes in the American tradition that includes Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, and Sinclair Lewis, but the satirical force of Marquand's novels calls forth comparisons to Austen, Thackeray, and Trollope, the most "eighteenth-century" of the nineteenth-century British novelists, rather than to the less self-consciously satirical Americans.



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