

Notes for Podcast: "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss"

Let's just start out with the title. It is an example of truth in advertising. The story is about a traveling monkey show with 26 monkeys, give or take a few because they depart sometimes and new ones arrive. Also, the chimpanzee is technically not a monkey, as the narrator points out a couple of times. And the monkeys, at the high point of their act, vanish from a claw-footed bathtub hung ten feet high, technically dropping into an "abyss."

But the story is also about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of life, and the hollow feeling a meaningless life produces. Contemplating this meaninglessness is sometimes called, "Looking into the abyss." Again, truth in advertising, doubly true in this case.

The story is told in limited third person. It starts with "Aimee's big trick," the monkeys disappearing from the bathtub. Then it describes how the monkey show works and explains that the monkeys return to the tour bus in ones and twos. Aimee has no idea how they vanish or where they go. We want to know how they vanish too, but we never find out. We do find out where they go, sort of.

After this introduction to the basic situation, the story does a flashback to when Aimee got the monkey show.

(Read section 4, 342)

We could discuss the story craft here. Why not start with Aimee acquiring the show? Why use a flashback?

After this, we get more details about how the show works and what life is like for Aimee and the monkeys. The show seems to be somewhat like a family. Aimee is solemnly welcomed to the group as the monkeys line up to shake her hand. When she acquires a boyfriend, he is also welcomed to the group. The monkeys live in unlocked cages and do whatever they want. They return with small objects, and sometimes new monkeys. The show continues. The monkeys have costumes and a variety of routines. The vanishing is the high point of the show.

On page 346, the author uses a word I had to look up. It says, "Geof has a class-C driver's license, but this is just langniappe." In this context, it means, "an unexpected benefit." Yes, even English professors have to look up words. Note also that the narrative briefly switches to present tense.

The sad part of the story is when Zeb, the apparent leader of the monkeys and perhaps the one who knows how the vanishing trick is done, dies. He is replaced by Pango, and everything continues as normal, until one day a man with a hollow look comes up to Aimee and says, "I have to buy this," and she says "I know you do," and sells it to him for a dollar, repeating the scene where she herself bought the show.

On 347, Aimee lists what she likes about this life.

(Read from page at the bottom.)

This is a very simple story in many ways. The fantastic is the vanishing and returning of the monkeys. The monkeys all get along, practice a few simple social rituals, and are all apparently brighter than the average monkey, though not geniuses, by any means. There seems to be some higher power that determines who needs this show and directs them to it and also determines when the current owner no longer needs it. Or do the monkeys do that? We don't know. Aimee thinks:

Read section 22 on 352.

Questions:

1. How does running the monkey show change Aimee? Is she cured of her hollowness by the time she has to give up the show?
2. Aimee seems to think that life is meaningless, but the fact that some power gives her the monkey show exactly when she need it, implies that the universe, or some aspect of it, cares about people (and monkeys). Does this story have a positive, optimistic message? What message does it imply?
3. The narrator gives us quite a bit of Aimee's thinking. She wonders, questions, philosophizes, and tries to figure out the monkeys and the trick. Sometimes, the narrator seems to be talking directly to us as in the paragraph on 348 that starts out "nothing is certain." Is this story trying to explore complex philosophical questions while seeming to be a simple tale of a somewhat unusual monkey show?
4. At one point, Aimee thinks that Geof is a meaningless boyfriend. Why does she stay with him? Was that the right choice?