

Gene Wolfe: Another New Sun question

The SF-Lovers list — 7 messages, 7 voices, 23 Jun 1994

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/121>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Curt Wiederhoeft — 23 Jun 1994, 20:58

OK. Here goes. After volunteering to help Mark Andersen with his planned _Book of the New Sun_ FAQ, I thought the least I could do is re-read the series and make sure that I haven't missed any of the mysteries mentioned on the net in the last few years.

SPOILERS HO!

I think I've now got a pretty thorough understanding of the tetrology, but before going back to _Urth_ again, I have one nagging question concerning the characters of Jonas and "Miles." To refresh your memory, Jonas is (at the time Severian meets him) a cyborg, trying to become "whole" again. It is implied that Jonas' organic parts are foreign (although Severian doesn't manage to catch on to this at all.) Eventually, he leaves Urth through Father Inire's mirrors.

In the opening of _Citadel_, Severian revives a dead soldier who retains no memories. Severian names him "Miles," but later makes the following statements:

I *don't* know who you are-but in another sense I think I may. I think you're two people, and that I know one of them.

...

He told me he would come back. He said, 'I will come back for her when I have been repaired, when I am sane and whole.' I didn't know quite what to think when he said that, but now I believe he has come.

Now my question: Is Severian's interpretation correct? It seems to me just as likely that with all of the time travel going on in the series, it might just be the case that a dead Miles provided the raw materials for Jonas' "patch job," and that Severian has it completely backwards.

Any enlightened folk out there? I'm going to be starting up on _Urth of the New Sun_ tomorrow, and I don't recall this sub-plot coming up the first time I read it. Please correct me if I'm wrong.

Curt

curtw at euler.jsc.nasa.gov

Mark Andersen — 23 Jun 1994, 22:23 · follows Curt Wiederhoeft

curtw at euler.jsc.nasa.gov (Curt Wiederhoeft) writes:

SPOILERS HO!

Now my question: Is Severian's interpretation correct? It seems to me just as likely that with all of the time travel going on in the series, it might just be the case that a dead Miles provided the raw materials for

Jonas' "patch job," and that Severian has it completely backwards.

I think you're closer to being right than Severian is.

In fact, this whole topic of time-travel effects in the *_New Sun_* is something I've been thinking about a lot lately. At first, I thought that some of the time-travel effects were "closed loops" and some were "open", but now I'm beginning to think they're all "open". (I'm putting "open" and "closed" in quotes here because I don't want people to get the mistaken impression that I'm thinking of these things as equivalent to the "closed time-like loops" of wormhole theory. I'm also still trying to figure out why people abbreviate "closed time-like loops" as CTTL instead of CTLL; maybe I've just been seeing traditional propagation of a typo, I don't know.)

Other examples: Ossipago, et al.; Gunnie and Burgundofara; The Claw of the Conciliator; Abaia's "girlfriend". All these characters (and artifact) are involved in timelines that move backward. I had another example in mind last night, but I was in the car and didn't write it down, so now, predictably, I've forgotten it. Maybe I should start carrying around a miniature tape recorder.

Slightly off the main subject, but still relevant to discussions of Gene Wolfe: Has anybody out there read enough Proust to feel qualified to comment on Proust's influences on Wolfe's work? Want to contribute to the planned *_New Sun_* FAQ? I can handle the Borges influences myself; and tracking down the Lewis influence will finally give me an excuse to read the *_Perelandra_* trilogy (a.k.a *_Space Trilogy_*), but Proust has just never been within my literary mean free path. Comments and contributions *_re_* other influences, particularly Nabokov, Faulkner, and Chesterton, are also welcome.

Mark Andersen
Department of Fishery and Wildlife Sciences
New Mexico State University

David Duffy — 24 Jun 1994, 06:08 · follows Mark Andersen

In *_Urth_* Severian is told that the events he thinks are results of the power of the Claw are in fact his own work - especially raising of the dead. That being the case, his misperception may have become truth the longer he knew Miles, something that Miles found more and more distressing.

David Duffy
Qld Inst Med Research
Queensland, Australia

Greg Slade — 24 Jun 1994, 08:21 · follows David Duffy

SPOILERS HO!

Now my question: Is Severian's interpretation correct? It seems to me just as likely that with all of the time travel going on in the series, it might just be the case that a dead Miles provided the raw materials for Jonas' "patch job," and that Severian has it completely backwards.

Egad. After all my bad-mouthing of Wolfe, a twist that never even occurred to me: not a RE-incarnation, but a PRE-incarnation, if you will. I had wondered if Severian had Jonas in mind, but that thread never seemed to go anywhere, so I didn't pursue it. But turning it on its head does make a fiendish kind of sense, if you write off Jonas' [INSERT AUSTRIAN ACCENT HERE] "I'll be back" as a red herring.

Darn, darn, darn. Now I'm going to have to read the whole five books much more seriously, just like everybody told me.

But I **still** think that "Go read some Star Trek novels" crack was a low blow...

Pekka P. Pirinen — 26 Jun 1994, 00:26 · follows Greg Slade

curtw at euler.jsc.nasa.gov "Curt Wiederhoeft" writes:

SPOILERS HO!

Now my question: Is Severian's interpretation correct? It seems to me just as likely that with all of the time travel going on in the series, it might just be the case that a dead Miles provided the raw materials for Jonas' "patch job," and that Severian has it completely backwards.

I don't think so. Remember that later on, Ava says "There was another patient here like you, and they told me he came with you.", apparently referring to having two minds in the same body. Also, Severian seems to be basing his deduction on Miles' style of speech rather than physical resemblance, and his remark about "I lost it somewhere along the way. That's what the jaguar said, who had promised to guide the goat." makes it clear he thought Jonas had taken over Miles' body. Finally, Miles' description of his earliest memories fits the conditions of Jonas' departure from the House Absolute.

Pekka P. Pirinen

Chun-Wai Chan — 27 Jun 1994, 15:22 · follows Pekka P. Pirinen

Mark Andersen <manderse at nmsu.edu> wrote:

Slightly off the main subject, but still relevant to discussions of Gene Wolfe: Has anybody out there read enough Proust to feel qualified to comment on Proust's influences on Wolfe's work? Want to contribute to the planned _New Sun_ FAQ? I can handle the Borges influences myself; and tracking down the Lewis influence will finally give me an excuse to read the _Perelandra_ trilogy (a.k.a _Space Trilogy_), but Proust has just never been within my literary mean free path. Comments and contributions _re_ other influences, particularly Nabokov, Faulkner, and Chesterton, are also welcome.

Well, the most obvious parallel between Wolfe and Proust is that most of their female characters are courtesans of one sort or another. ;-)

My opinion is that Wolfe and Proust may share a concern with memory and detailed recollection, but it is a commonality of device rather than content. Proust's recollections are concerned with social minutiae, detailed observations of human beings and their struggle to both conform and to free themselves from society. Wolfe's concerns are more metaphysical; I think Ursula LeGuin's comment that "Wolfe is our Melville" is on the mark.

C. Chan

Laboratory of Astrophysics and Space Research
Enrico Fermi Institute
The University of Chicago

Peter Stephenson — 27 Jun 1994, 15:27 · follows Chun-Wai Chan

manderse at nmsu.edu (Mark Andersen) writes:

Slightly off the main subject, but still relevant to discussions of Gene Wolfe: Has anybody out there read enough Proust to feel qualified to comment on Proust's influences on Wolfe's work? Want to contribute to the planned _New Sun_ FAQ? I can handle the Borges influences myself; and tracking down the Lewis influence will finally give me an excuse to read the _Perelandra_ trilogy (a.k.a _Space Trilogy_), but Proust has just never been within my literary mean free path. Comments and contributions _re_ other influences, particularly Nabokov, Faulkner, and Chesterton, are also welcome.

I've thought about this over the last few years, but I've never come to any definitive conclusions.

My impression, having read both a lot of Wolfe and Remembrance of Things Past (which is a lot of book) is that mostly the influence is rather indirect; probably Proust influenced his style more than anything else. The only explicit reference I know (apart from actually mentioning Proust in Peace, which doesn't really count) is in the Fifth Head of Cerberus: the opening sentence deliberately echoes Proust's. In Peace, too, Proustian memory seems to relate quite well to Weer's descriptions. At odd moments - Severian staring up at the sky after leaving Thrax springs to mind - Wolfe's descriptions recall Proust, but mostly the narrative is rather different, although the use of prose is similar in that both have an orthodox style which nonetheless manages some extremely deep resonances (I haven't read Proust in French more than a paragraph or two).

Time is certainly a major theme in both works, but Wolfe's dealings with time are much more general than Proust's, who is mainly interested in its direct effects on human beings, and who deals with it by and large by inference: how characters have changed, how his narrator's memories have altered. Proust's Marcel's memories are much less explicit than Severian's: the whole import of the famous Petit Madeleine episode is that he has lost some experience from his memory, then recaptured it (I'm grossly oversimplifying, of course), something not really possible for Severian. The incredible synthesis of all the different sub-themes of time which takes place towards the end of Citadel of the Autarch is way beyond anything similar Proust attempted, but in its different way it is certainly about 'Time Regained' - the title of the last volume of Proust's book.

Other possible ideas which may be nonsense:

- - the party in Thrax might have hints of one of Proust's long descriptions of social events; Severian describes himself as sort of Lorentz invariant (he's the only person there in his own clothes) while Proust writes about the period when relativity was discovered (tenuous, but in Wolfe's case it's hard to be over-detailed). However, I think this episode centres on the 'paradox' theme which doesn't really relate well to Proust.

- - Proust's last sentence, which I can't remember well, is to the effect that he'd like to write about people who have a wider experience of time. Perhaps Wolfe's work is in this sense a sort of sequel to Proust's?

Anyone else got any views? I'd like to hear them: Proust and Wolfe are probably my two favourite prose writers of the century.

One comment in re Faulkner: the social milieu of the places Severian passes through on leaving Nessus does recall Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, but perhaps that's inevitable.

Peter Stephenson
Department of Physics
University of Wales at Swansea
Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, U.K.
P.Stephenson at swan.ac.uk