

Continuing Westward

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 16 Jul 1998

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Robert Borski — 16 Jul 1998, 21:12

"Continuing Westward" reminds me of "Suzanne Delage" in several respects. (1) It's an homage piece to another writer, this time Rudyard Kipling. And (2) its more fantastic elements don't really emerge until you realize the story is actually about something else. In other words you need still another relevant text to help decode the story properly (just as I argue Snow White helps us to make sense of Suzanne Delage, even though I know all of you don't buy into this).

Given the locale of the story--Turkey during World War I--and our unnamed narrator's stated direction--"Continuing Westward" (which almost certainly plays off Kipling's six year stint at a school called Westward Ho! in Devon)--one needn't be either Rand or McKnally to figure out where we'll eventually end up. Of course, the biplane we're traveling in is incapable of flight, having been caught in a premature explosion, and our compass is a good 30 degrees off north, so it might take us a while, even if we do manage to get our directions right. But so far, so good: the dust we've raised hasn't come to the attention of our calvaried enemies--"the Turkish horse"--and eventually we even reach a primitive desert village, where many of the people are either blind or one-eyed and we're served mutton. Here we're also treated to the dancing ministrations of a local tribal girl who is so irresistable our narrator abandons his comrade de guerre, Sanderson (who eats "like a pig"), and he takes off with the little desert vixen for parts unknown.

Got everything figured out yet?

The unnamed narrator is No-Man, or Odysseus. The biplane with its torn silk wings and broken compass is his ship, lost 20 years in the return from war. "Turkish horse" references the Trojan Horse (ancient Troy was located in what is now modern Turkey). The blind villagers symbolize Teiresias; the one-eyed are the Cyclops, who raise sheep. (The blind might also represent Polyphemus after the eye-poke.) And Sanderson, in addition to being Paris, the son of Priam (aka Alexandros, according to Homer), is the ensorcelled pig of Circe.

As for the desert girl, who has broken radio parts woven into her hair, and who's described over and over again by the noises she's making (lots of ringing and jingling), she's the siren. Only this time Odysseus has not stopped up his ears with wax and so is unable to avoid her call. And now he'll never return to Greece and patient Penelope. (Kipling, of course, did have his anti-feminist side--witness The Light That Failed; and The Naulahka--so this may play into the femme fatale ending as well.)

Then again a lithe young desert girl...I could think of worse ways to go, westward or otherwise <g>.

Robert Borski

mary whalen — 16 Jul 1998, 22:38 · follows Robert Borski

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

Robert Borski wrote:

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who's described over and over again by the noises she's making (lots of

ringing and jingling), she's the siren. Only this time Odysseus has not

stopped up his ears with wax and so is unable to avoid her call.

This seems to fit, but how does it fit in that he originally thought that she stabbed Sanderson? He didn't just decide to leave him, he thought that he was dead.

prion