

The Doctor of Death Island

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Robert Borski — 20 Jul 1998, 21:16

Some bits and pieces on "The Doctor of Death Island," because it's easier to discuss that way.

Unlike its two predecessors in the Archipelago series, which draw mainly on Greek myth, much of TDoDI is based on the legend of Faust, incorporating names and incidents from both Marlowe and Goethe versions. Alan Alvard, the viewpoint character, is clearly Mephistopheles, while humanity in general represents Faust (although at times Alvard also represents Faust). Other figures named after Faustian characters include: Dr. Margotte and Megan Carstensen (both derive from Margaret, as does Goethe's Margarete), while Ellen and Little Nell recall Helen of Troy, and President Sanderson is Alexander the Great. It may also be possible to locate the Seven Deadly Sins (Megan with her three paramours is Lechery, Barry Seigle may be Covetousness, etc. etc.). As for parallel incidents Alvard waiting to be rejuvenated by cell therapy recalls a similar scene where Faust has his youth restored in the Witch's Kitchen, and the stairs scene at the novella's end recalls the finale in Goethe. There are also several seduction scenes. Perhaps Peter Stephenson, who's graced us with his Goethe translations, could come up with more correspondences?

As for the Faustian bargain struck by humanity, this time we sell our souls for immortality. And as we've come to expect in works by Gene Wolfe, this usurping of God's authority leads directly to damnation. Mankind may indeed need never die, but at what cost? Wolfe speculates the "gift" of immortality could well lead to the death of love, art, science, literature and religion--in short, much of what makes us human. Thus we'd be little more than George Romero figures: anonymous living dead. In addition, as he does in "Silhouette," Wolfe associates mankind's inability to read--a change brought about by Alvard, with his invention of talking books--with Godlessness, which no doubt plays off of the Gospel of Saint John, with its Word = God equivalency.

The novella takes place in Greyhame Prison. "Ham" can mean home or town, so Greyhame--which is described as having long grey walls--seems an appropriate name for the physical structure. In addition, "hame" can mean, according to the OED, "a covering, esp. a natural covering, integument, skin, membrane, slough (of a serpent)." Given the association of the devil with serpents, this too seems appropriate, given the novella's theme. But I'd like to suggest "Greyhame" also invokes the notion of Grey Friars, which is what Franciscan monks were once called--in Doctor Faustus, when Mephistophilis first appears, Faustus commands him to take the form of a Franciscan.

The 7th floor of Greyhame Prison is where Alan Alvard is confined, both before cryogenic suspension and after. This strikes a parallel with Dante's Inferno, where murderers are confined to the 7th circle. (Alvard has killed his business partner.)

Dr. Margotte is the titular doctor of Death Island. Since he's often present when patients "pass over" (the 7th floor is reserved for pre-CT terminal cases), he most likely represents Charon, the mythological ferryman for the dead. But with his white hair and "blasted hands," he may also

represent Rotwang and Dr. Strangelove, two other figures associated with technology run amok. His entering cryonic suspension shortly after Alvard does signifies that mankind, now on the road to immortality, no longer has need of his services. On the other hand, his return at the novella's end may offer a thin ray of hope--especially if Alvard/Mephistopheles is going to help humanity return to a former state of grace. But as with much of Wolfe, the ending's ambiguous in this regard. (It seems as if the quoted OLIVER TWIST should be a clue. But is Alvard the peddler, who will cleanse humanity's "stain," or is he Bill Sikes, who'll kill both his girlfriend and himself trying to escape? Fwiw, the last word of the story is "blood-stain" and Alvard has been earlier associated with Cain.)

The name "Alan Alvard," in addition to having the same sort of Dickensian alliterative qualities as Nicholas Nickleby and Philip Pirrip, probably derives from alvary, meaning "womb" (OED), since his Dickens Genre Jinn virus is very similar to a sexually-transmitted disease (books must be cover to cover for the infection to transfer). But it may also derive from vlad + alucard, since Alvard is compared to Count Dracula at one point by Jessie--another Prince of Darkness and representative of the living dead.

Genre Jinn also reminds me of a phrase often associated with technological mayhem, especially as practiced by someone for the first time--i.e., the genie's out of the bottle

Whereas the first two stories in the Archipelago series draw upon the works of C.S. Lewis, H.G. Wells, and Henry de Vere Stacpoole for their islands, TDoDI draws upon two different works. The first is a painting, Isle of the Dead, by Arnold Boecklin. This is the goldfish bowl island, which Alvard compares to the 7th level of Greyhame Prison. The other island comes from Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, and it is Laputa. This is both the floating Presidential Center and the derelict floating ghost island Alvard sees from his window (if the latter isn't a hallucination). The immortals of TDoDI may also represent Swift's Struldbruggs, and it's possible that the short story "Civis Laputus Sum" is set in the same universe as TDoDI, being at least a thematic prequel.

Having Dickens be the viral agent infecting all of the world's talking books and documents not only allows Gene Wolfe to pay tribute to one of his favorite writers, but also to wreak some punning cleverness, since "dickens" (as in the exclamation, "The dickens you say!") is also a euphemism for devil. Notice as well the first book we see evidence of infection in--YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN by Thomas Wolfe.

Megan Carstensen, whom Alvard eventually becomes cell mates with and a potential lover of, is described as "fresh and cool and virginal as an asphodel in an ash can." Asphodels were at one time thought immortal and they supposedly cover the Elysium Fields. But as is appropriate for someone who poisoned a young man who was much prettier than she is, Megan's asphodel sits in an ash can--metaphorical hell. The name Carstensen also probably derives from German painter Asmus Jakob Carstens, whose most famous work is entitled The Fall of the Angels.

The narrative structure of TDoDI is somewhat unusual in that each new section begins in the italicized present, but then elides into the past tense. I believe this is meant to echo "The Island of Dr. Death & Other Stories," where Tacky, in employing a second-person present point of view, is not so much talking to himself, but communing with us, his readers, hoping for a more intimate connection. I.e., the story is talking to us in the same way the Genre Jinn books do their readers.

Lastly, according to Urth-Man Extraordinary, at one time Gene Wolfe was working on a novel entitled IN GREYHAME PRISON. TDoDI is obviously a big chunk of it (as possibly might be "Civis Laputus Sum"), but I wonder why Wolfe never finished the entire work. Possibly because an

editor erroneously suggested it required too much knowledge of Dickens to understand?

Robert Borski