

Good Ship/Bad Ship

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Alex David Groce — 22 Jul 1998, 10:11

It seems to be that space ships in Wolfe stories are very seldom simply neutral tools, carrying people around space. They're more like the little girl with the curl--"when they are good, they're very, very good/ but when they are bad they are horrid!" It is mostly a case of the events that take place on the ships, obviously, but there also seems, in the case of the evil ships, to be a hint of the "haunted house" story--the ships themselves are places of evil, perhaps because of the purposes to which they have been bent in the past.

The "heavenly" ships, actually, aren't as strong a case as the "diabolical" ships. In the class of good ships, I'd place Tzad's ship, for obvious reasons. The only other example I can think of is Daw's ship in "Alien Stones", "guided" as it were, by the Old & New Testaments.

However, the evil ships are more definite. "All the Hues of Hell" is fairly obvious for Wolfe: the ship is hovering over Hell, and picks up a demon. There are unpleasant indications of machine over man, a mindless worship of "life" in any form, even demonic, and of course the ending "Rosemary's Baby" twist.

"The Other Dead Man" I also recall as investing a space ship with a fair amount of symbolic evil. It even fits very nicely into the "haunted house" theme, by not allowing the dead to rest.

Finally, there is a story that, for my money, is one of Wolfe's most disturbing and enigmatic tales: "Silhoutte"

"Silhoutte" reminds me now (it didn't when I last read it because I hadn't read any Aickman then) of a Robert Aickman story, specifically the story of the Anglican church vault, busted by the bell, opening a (possible) gateway to hell, although that's the minor action of the story (I cannot recall the title now). I'm not sure WHY it reminds me of that story, other than that I find both tales disturbing, can't decide if I sympathize with the protagonists in either story, and don't even pretend to really understand either story.

By the way, it strikes me that many Wolfe readers would probably enjoy Aickman. Aickman has an extraordinary way with words, but demands constant attention from the reader and often says more by what he carefully avoids saying than by anything else. On the other hand, I think Wolfe usually plays fair in that there IS a reasonable (if startling) interpretation of events that can (in theory) be worked out by the reader. I think Aickman is often engaged in the somewhat different game of using subconscious symbolism and intentionally undecipherable clues to simply leave you vaguely terrified without a focus for the terror. Which is, after all, a good enough game in itself--Aickman's metaphysical horrors are, to my mind, a lot more interesting than Lovecraft's cosmic monstrosities.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

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