

Mysteries of 5HC

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 22 Jul 1998

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Alex David Groce — 22 Jul 1998, 10:51

There has been a great deal of time and energy invested in attempting to unravel certain mysteries of 5HC, including the Marsch/V. R. T. question (who killed who? when? why? what's the R. was "Marsch" a spy? how'd #5 guess? or did he?), Veil's/Liev's hypotheses and the surrounding puzzles (who's an abo? Aunt Jeannine? Trenchard? are the abos dead? massacred?) and the numerous questions of family relationships, parentages, and the past history of the colonies.

Not to discourage these interesting arguments, but it seems to me that Wolfe is very probably not "playing fair" in 5HC. I trust Wolfe, usually to, if he seems to invite the reader to consider a question, give the reader enough clues to answer it, and be fairly certain of the arrived-at answer's correctness. In 5HC, I think that it's more as if Wolfe has given the reader enough rope to hang himself. I think the answers are intentionally ambiguous, and that "red herrings" that, interpreted one way are not "red herrings", and sometimes even seem to confirm two theories, abound.

I don't think this is simply malevolence on Wolfe's part, but an extremely important thematic decision. I think Ursula LeGuin once called 5HC "the uncertainty principle embodied as fiction." I think she was correct.

The various "histories" (personal and political) in 5HC are, to some extent, unknowable even to the participants. Personal and social identity has been frustrated, in a truly Kafka-esque sense. Certainly, the various members of the "house Wolfe" do not really understand their own identities. The various Wolfes cannot grasp their own ability to progress, and cannot escape their intense alienation. That their planet seems to be half populated by their genetic kin extends this self-obsession to the whole world. And, indeed, the Orwellian (but subtler) government fits in perfectly with the theme--pushing papers around and playing power games without any sense of destination, and with no one (apparently) aware of where they really stand in the whole affair. The open slavery and sexual exploitation are the outward manifestations of an undirected malevolence.

The sister world, St. Anne, is no better. If we can believe anything of "A Story", which is doubtful, the previous inhabitants were engaged in complex, strange, warfare. And possibly, the next settlers massacred the old inhabitants, making the question of their possible human origins practically impossible to determine. Or, many of the abos may have escaped (although the shovel test does indicate an attempt at genocide at some point). Either way, there's a great deal in the past that both sides want to cover up--one side may want to hide an attempt at genocide, the other side wants to hide their continued existence, and possibly conceal how many "people" are actually abos.

So. The Wolfe clan isn't even sure how ubiquitous they've become, and fails so signally to understand itself that no member can break the cycle of stagnation. The police-state rulers seem, on principle, to hide and distort any facts they get ahold of, even from the other members of the government, who sensibly don't trust each other. St. Anne & Earth may be spying on this government, or this may be a fiction invented for unknown purposes. Some/all/none of the people on St. Croix may be abos from St. Anne, but if so they have every reason to hide the fact. Even if none are, then Aunt Jeannine is attempting to confuse this truth.

The people of St. Anne also seem to have a past to hide, and the abos are definitely (if there are any left!) deceptive and secretive.

So, are there ANY really reliable narrators in 5HC? #5 is probably as close as we come, and although it seems likely he is largely telling the truth, he leaves out a great deal (such as his "father's" death). And fails to explain other things--such as his method of getting rid of Marsch--if it's simply a wild accusation, it's astonishing that it's (possibly) right on the mark. "A Story" is possibly a murder-confession, possibly an anthropological fantasy, and possibly a real event buried under a layer of myth, or perhaps even fairly correctly narrated. Their seems to be no possible way of telling.

And Marsch's notebook is, I'm convinced, a tissue of misdirection and lies, whoever is writing what part of it.

So, defending any hypothesis, other than the really obvious ones (#5 is a clone, he probably killed his father, Marsch was probably killed by V. R. T--although I think this one is easily interpretable as Marsch pretending to be replaced by V. R. T. for unknown reasons connected to his possibly being a spy) is difficult. There is probably evidence to hint at it, and evidence to hint that it is not true. It seems to me that the duality of Veil's/Liev's is a hitn to this--we don't know which is true, if either, and, really, we only suspect what Liev's hypothesis is because of what Veil's is. And "veil" suggests that any hypothesis made hides the truth more than it exposes it.

Wolfe's suggestion seems to be that surrounded by an atmosphere of cruelty, habitual deception, and given an attitude utterly dismissive of the dignity and freedom of other beings, a true understanding of the world, or even an unimpeachable conviction of one's own identity becomes impossible. In the depths of a man-made hell, the soul may still exist, something may persist of identity beyond a simple combination of "Genes" and environment, but that to "know thyself" or anything else, except that possibly 2+2 is not equal to 5, is impossible. Satan is "The Father of Lies" and the story the begins at 666 Saltimbanque seems to show that Hell's walls may cover a planet, an invisible an inescapable labyrinth of lies.

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

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William H. Ansley — 22 Jul 1998, 23:09 · follows Alex David Groce

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Amen!

I agree with you completely and I think this would be a very appropriate last word on 5HC...

but I know it won't be. 8->

William Ansley

adam louis stephanides — 23 Jul 1998, 12:33 · follows William H. Ansley

On Wed, 22 Jul 1998 Alex David Groce wrote:

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This make a lot of sense to me, as does the rest of your excellent post. It's further confirmed by the very last action in the book, when the officer finds a spool of tape he'd overlooked and drops it out the window: it's as if Wolfe is telling us that he's deliberately leaving out vital information.

I question, though, how much this is unique to 5HC. I used to have the same trust in Wolfe as you do, but lately I've been wondering. While Wolfe's other work may not involve deliberate deception to the extent 5HC does, there are certainly many in which the narrator fails to understand what is going on, and I'm beginning to suspect the ambiguity this produces may often be unresolvable. In the "Suzanne Delage" discussion, for instance, while each of the participants may have been "fairly certain" of the correctness of his or her solution, none of us seemed to get very far convincing anyone else. I've never seen a satisfactory explication of CASTLEVIEW. And when mantis himself suggests that we should "stop making sense" of the first half of URTN, well, then you know there's trouble in River City.

--Adam