

Many Mansions

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 22 Sep 1998

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Robert Borski — 22 Sep 1998, 01:30

Between its Biblically-resonant title and Baba Yaga hut-on-the-run ending, Gene Wolfe's "Many Mansions" (found in GW's BOOK OF DAYS) has one other thing I feel recommends it for must reading: I believe it's possible to argue the story takes place in the same milieu as THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS and specifically on the world of Sainte Anne. At the very least I see it as companion piece to FIFTH HEAD, in much the same way "A Solar Labyrinth" and "Four Wolves" can be read in regards to NEW SUN.

Here's how I figure:

1) The story is formatted in interview style, much like the entries in Dr. Marsch's journal. Taking turns speaking are Old Woman and Old Man, and all we have are their transcribed oral testimonies. Could "Many Mansions" be a missing folktale from Marsch's journal? Might it have been related by Dr. Hagsmith?

2) The Old Man's first name is Todd, which means "fox," recalling the similarly-named Wolfes of Sainte Croix. There's also a Shadow Child named Foxfire (at least when his group configures five), as well as the Old Wise One.

3) As have the colonists of Sainte Anne, Todd-and-Nor's people have lost a war to the Motherworld.

4) In the War, "Half the autochthons were killed, like most of us; those that were left were happy enough to run off into the fens, or lie around the towns waiting for someone to rob." This is *exactly* what happened to the abos; some return to the meadowmeres, others steal whatever they can to get by.

5) The Old Woman's account of settler life is very similar to Mary Blount's. Cf. the Old Woman's remark--"She was such a pretty thing, just like you"--with similar words by Mrs. Blount: "Weren't they [the local French girls] the cutest things?"

6) Nor's account of Lily the prostitute recalls the fate of many abo women: i.e., they're reduced to whoring for a livelihood.

7) At least two of the names are French (Dode Beckette, Chackerville), while the rest seem mainly English--this is consistent with place and character names in FIFTH HEAD. Nepo Pass, in turn, suggests the cloning convolutions of the Wolfe clan (nepo = descendant).

8) The Old Woman describes her house as consisting of "Wood, or what looks like it." The abos of Sainte Anne--recalling their pleiomorphic abilities--are also so described. ("I asked him how the creature appeared, and he said sometimes like a man, but sometimes like the post of a fence...Or a dead tree, something of the sort.") The abos also believe trees may contain the spirits of their ancestors--so a house made of wood might explain the Great Aunt Edna

denouement.

9) In "Many Mansions," roses climb the front of the house. In FIFTH HEAD, at 666 Saltimbanque, it's the trumpet vine.

10) Using native flora, the brewmeister's of "Many Mansions" are able to decoct a beverage that makes you feel "like you're young and going to live forever. Like nothing bad ever happened to you, and you're likely to meet your mother and dad and everybody you ever liked that's dead now just around the next turn in the road." The Shadow Children of Sainte Anne have a similar-acting drug.

11) The offworlder who comes from the Reconstruction Center to the hut of "Many Mansions" may be a clone, or born in vitro--the same as Number Five.

12) Memories of a Proustian sort (including the sharing of cake--madeleine?) play an important role in the unfolding of "Many Mansions."

13) Wolfe tells us in the intro the story does not take place on Earth.

Of course, though there's a baker's dozen of them, these may be more superficial similarities than true fidelities. And I do have problems with the Amazonian-like nature of the unnamed visitor from the Reconstruction Center--her people, who've won the War, seem more like the rocket-building feminazis of "In Looking Glass Castle" than anyone else we meet in FIFTH HEAD. But all in all I still feel many of the comparisons are valid.

Anyone else care to weigh in with opinions?

Robert Borski

Mark Millman — 22 Sep 1998, 14:56 · follows Robert Borski

On Tuesday 22 September 1998, Robert Borski wrote:

At the very least I see ["Many Mansions"]
as companion piece to FIFTH HEAD, in
much the same way "A Solar Labyrinth"
and "Four Wolves" can be read in regards
to NEW SUN.

I'm not familiar with "Four Wolves". Where
can I find it?

That's not the collective title for the "Red-
wood Coast Roamer", "In the Old Hotel",
etc., short-shorts, is it?

Mark Millman