

Changeling and Death Island

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 22 Jul 1997

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Jim Jordan — 22 Jul 1997, 23:46

Mantis et al.,

Let's go with Mantis's implied suggestion, and use "Pete" for Peter Palmer, and "Peter" for Peter Palmieri. The observations that follow are grist for the mill, and largely supersede my first post on this complex story.

1. I agree that there are Peter Pan allusions, but I have not found the encrypted proof at the end of the story. So, puh-leeze, spell it out for us.

1a. Pan note: "Peter Palmieri always wanted to play Vikings or something like that." In other words, Pirates. Later on, "We meant to play Pirates, or something."

2. The title is "The Changeling," and as we know, titles mean a whole lot in Wolfe. The story is about changeable Pete, not unchanging Peter. That's gotta be important.

2a. Ernie Cotha says, "Nobody leaves Cassonsville." Well, Pete and his family did. It does seem, however, as if Cassonsville is pretty unchanging. People do grow, but things change slowly. Cotha's teeth have been fixed, but otherwise.... The convent school and the photo have aged somewhat.

2b. The island is completely unchanging: "Maybe it was because every tree and rock and bush and berry tangle was familiar and unaltered." Bushes and berry tangles unaltered? A truly timeless place. More later.

3. What changes does Pete undergo?

- a. Left Cassonsville the month before starting 5th grade, maybe.
- b. Changes name from Pete Palmer to something else.
- c. When his father died, "things changed for me then."
- d. Becomes a communist.
- e. Returns to America.
- f. Returns to Cassonsville.
- g. Moves to island.

4. The unchanging island is the grave. That's why there are crosses there. That's why Peter says that nobody can throw a rock to the farther shore, the living world. That's why the island is closer to the shore in the eyes of the older Pete, who is nearer to death than he was when a child. The hermit's cave at the end equals a tomb.

5. If Peter doesn't change at all, Sister Leona "hadn't changed much; nuns don't."

6. May I make a bold move, for the sake of discussion? Peter is Pan, but also Christ.

Unchanging. He is linked into the Italian Family (Church), with Papa (Pope), Mama (Church), Maria (Mary), and Paul. Only Papa (Pope) and Pete notice Peter as such, Papa because he is the vicar of Christ, and Pete because... he's supposed to replace Papa as new Pope? Nuns don't change much because they also represent the Unchanging Christ. Cassonsville changes a bit more rapidly, but yet much more slowly than Pete has, as a result of leaving Cassonsville.

7. "Nobody leaves Cassonsville." Well, Pete left, and disappeared. He's not in the school picture, and not in the written records (the Bible? the Book of Life of the Lamb?). If someone leaves Cassonsville, he become "nobody," non-existent in terms of Cassonsville.

8. "Peter still has the same last name as always and I guess now he always will." Why? Because Pete was supposed to grow up, marry Maria, and Peter would move into his house? Mama wanted Pete to stay in Maria's room, but he wouldn't.

9. Now I'm building quite a bit, but let me make another bold move. Papa is the Pope. Paul, the younger, cocky child is Protestantism. Paul insists he can throw a rock from the eternal to the temporal (the Rock is Christ?), but he can't, because he's not the Pope. Sure, he's a member of the family, but not completely playing by the rules.

Pete is supposed to be the new Pope, but he has apostatized. He is, in that sense, a changeling. He chucks his true name and becomes a commie (shades of liberation theology!), but even when he returns, he won't take up with Maria and make a home for Peter (Christ).

My guess is that this story is, in part, Wolfe's conservative catholic take on the present state of the Roman Catholic Church, at least at the time it was written (1968). At that time, Wolfe was probably more right-wing than he is now (and in terms of mainstream American thinking, he's pretty right-wing now).

Note that Peter Palmer is just American for Peter Palmieri. So, the old Italian (earlier) Catholic church was holding on, keeping Peter (Jesus) around in a home, but the American Catholics don't make a home for Peter. They change their name and become commies (liberation theology). So, Peter has to stay in an Italian family, increasingly marginalized at the edge of town.

Peter's last name is still Palmieri at the end, the Italian (Catholic) name, but the boys who are with him (Him) don't call him by it much. Protestant Paul has more influence with them. Too bad Pete refused his calling. (Too bad from Wolfe's point of view; as a Calvinist I have my own....)

3 again: What changes does Pete undergo?

- a. Left Cassonsville the month before starting 5th grade, maybe. His folks moved away, and took him with them.
- b. Changes name from Pete Palmer to something else. This is a rejection of his true calling and nature.
- c. When his father died, "things changed for me then." This is true in every man's life. So, does he take God as Father, or run away? The latter.
- d. Becomes a communist. This will be the opposite pole from where he began.
- e. Returns to America. A step back, not not enough.
- f. Returns to Cassonsville. Here he is given the opportunity to return to his calling, but he refuses.
- g. Moves to island. Death, but not a death-in-community (heaven) but a death-alone (hell). Compare the picture of hell in Lewis's **The Great Divorce.** Also, I cannot help but think of the contemptable situation of a able-bodied man living off the gifts of others, who treat him as a guru. Pete has moved into the mentality of Hinduism. Others wish they could be like him: freeloading and living the life of ease.

Well, every time I re-read this I add to it, and I'd better quit. It's your turns.

Nutria (who sure ain't got the last word on this one!)