

Westwind (Spoilers)

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 25 Jul 1997

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Michael Straight — 25 Jul 1997, 14:10

Since the whorl list has been fairly quiet, I decided I could subscribe to the urth list without drowning, and thought I'd say "Hi" with some comments about the short story "Westwind." Spoilers Ho! Fore!

I can't remember which anthology I read this in, but I read Wolfe's introduction first (where he makes a few comments about each of the stories) trusting him not to spoil any of the stories, but I think he truly ruined this one for me.

The story is wonderfully ambiguous about whether the ruler (I forget what he's called in the story) is a benevolent God-like figure who loves and secretly carries on a personal relationship with all his subjects (or at least all of the "good" ones), or a dictator using computer technology and trickery as a form of social control (convincing subjects who live in poverty - in contrast to the beauty seen when he addresses them all on the big screen - that they have an exclusive, secret relationship with the ruler so that they won't want to oppose him).

I've wondered if the story isn't something of a Rorschach test revealing the readers own predispositions, whether people who do not believe in a benevolent God are more likely to interpret the story as sinister (or maybe most sf readers would interpret it as sinister since the "benevolent ruler turns out to be nasty dictator" is such a common idea in sf).

Anyone want to chime in on how you interpreted the story and whether you think that reveals anything about yourself? I'll never know what my initial reaction would have been because in the introduction, Wolfe says that the story is about God and so I interpreted it in a positive light and didn't notice the possible sinister aspects until later.

But there's more to discuss here than first reactions. Can the story be read in a positive light? Even if he hasn't outright lied to people, the leader seems to have mislead many of them (all of them?) into thinking they are each the only Westwind. Is everyone Westwind or just those who voiced support for the leader? (Do you get to be Westwind because you support him, or do you support him because you're Westwind?) Can the leader be human or must he either be a multi-tasking computer or divine (I'm thinking of the fact that he seems able to talk to all the Westwinds at the same time)?

-Rostrum

Scott Dalrymple — 25 Jul 1997, 15:44 · follows Michael Straight

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I haven't re-read "Westwind" in awhile, but I remember it well. I don't recall feeling anything sinister. I actually see the story as quite poignant and spiritual. The main character thinks he is the only eyes of his god, and it makes him feel special; when he overhears another "special" messenger at the end of the story, he/we realize that it isn't quite so, and that perhaps everyone has such a personal relationship with god/God. I don't see this as sinister, but poignant. I think it a lovely story, one of Wolfe's best. It didn't surprise me at all when I read somewhere that Wolfe himself thinks it one of his best, along with "A Solar Labrynth."

Speaking of that story, does anyone else have copies of the audiotapes of Wolfe reading it and "Dr. Death & Other Stories"? There's also a tape of an interview. They're both quite fun; Wolfe reads his stories as no one else could.

Scott Dalrymple

Michael Straight — 10 Oct 1997, 14:50 · follows Scott Dalrymple

On Thu, 9 Oct 1997, Jim Jordan wrote at the end of a post about Holly Hunter:

Lemme reiterate that some allegories are specific and some are very vague.
In Wolfe, "Westwind" is pretty specific, while "The Man in the Pepper Mill" is pretty vague.

I'm inclined to disagree with you about Westwind. I've seen your list of a=x, b=y, c=z for that story, but I don't think an allegorical reading, where each element of the story represents a specific thing or concept in the real world, is the best one.

I think the most interesting way of reading the story is to consider the story and the situation it presents as a whole and how it compares to real life epistemological uncertainty and Christian faith.

If you are not thinking about God or Christian faith when you read the story, it may come across as a typical (almost sf-cliche) "Blade Runner-type" scenario. The setting is a tavern/hotel in the future, but it's just as poor, dirty and grungy as some of the worst that can be found in cities today. Meanwhile on the big TV screen, the commoners get a message from the Leader who lives in comparative beauty and luxury. He tries to sound benevolent, but the commoners see through the politician's happy-talk and are more intersted in the game.

Then it gets interesting. Some of the commoners seem quite devoted to this Leader, even though they live in a world of poverty and suffering, the woman recently preyed upon by someone. We soon find the reason for the young man's loyalty, he is secretly "Westwind," a friend and spy for the Leader.

However, in a surprise ending, we find that the blind girl and the owner of the tavern *also* think they are "Westwind" and have same kind of communication link with the Leader. Obviously, the Leader is using some kind of computer technology to simultaneously pretend to talk with many people at once. Or maybe the Leader is himself just a digitized computer

personality. Thus, people of goodwill are co-opted away from any thoughts of overthrowing the government and improving their lot because each thinks he or she has a special, unique link with the Leader. A perfect sf-method of social control.

Or is it? True in many sf stories the leaders in charge who live in luxury are the bad guys, but maybe this Leader is different. Maybe he really does love each of those people. Maybe he's more than human, and genuinely able to converse with many people at once. But if he's so good and powerful, why are his people living like this?

Now, I have to admit that this isn't the way I initially read the story, because in the anthology I read, Wolfe introduced it by saying it was about God, so I started out assuming the Leader was good and only afterwards saw the other, more sinister interpretation. But I think it's fruitful to compare the story as a whole and the different thoughts and emotions it raises to the different perspectives people have of trying to reconcile the ideas of a good, loving God who has a personal relationship with each of his people, with the suffering people experience.

If you have faith that the Leader really is good, in spite of appearances, then the portrayal of the intimate, personal relationship, of speaking together privately before bedtime, is very moving. If you don't, then the whole thing is revolting. Obviously, Wolfe chooses the first way of looking at things (and so do I), but nothing about the story forces you to interpret it that way, which is part of why I think it is so great.

-Rostrum