

Realism, Thoughts, apologies,

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 30 Apr 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1606>

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Jonathan Laidlow — 30 Apr 1999, 10:49

Well, what a pickle I've obviously got myself in....

First - let me apologise for portions of my second post of yesterday, written in reply to my good friend Nigel. Our discussion got interesting and we decided to carry it over into Urth. Unfortunately as I was in a rush I didn't edit it for public consumption but just sent on a copy. Whadda mistakada make-a (in best Manuel voice)

I also tend to punctuate like my master and nemesis, Tristram Shandy. I apologise again.

So first off, I must apologise to Robert Borski for taking his name in vein and mis-representing him as a 'classic realist'. This came from a discussion Nigel and I were having where I stated that I disagreed with attempts to forge links between different works by Wolfe, such as BotNS and Fifth Head of Cerberus, which poor Robert has suggested. My belief is that unless the link is necessary to the story, or stated explicitly in the text, then it does not seem valid to me. I prefer thinking that Wolfe has certain thematic conceits which he reuses, but I'm prepared to wait and see if Blue and Green are St Croix and St Anne. So my use of his surname and a sweeping generalisation was not so much an attack on Robert, but a reminder to Nigel of our discussion.

Now to Roy.

I apologise on behalf of academics everywhere - I never intended to pigeonhole you or tar you with a broad brush. Unfortunately I did, and must apologise, as I now realise that you are the originator of the whole Jonas/Sidero/android classification thread. I think what I wanted to do was try to draw you to a point and explain to me what it adds to our reading of the Urth cycle when we know what kind of android he is - David's suggestion that he is the tin man is fascinating - I just wanted to prompt the discussion onwards a little. Similarly Potto's comment about Wolfe's 'subtle game of clues' leads me to ask, what do the clues about Jonas tell us about the larger story?

Now to classic realism - this was just a bad paragraph attempting to explain to Nigel what I meant when I dismissed the 'realism' of BotNS. Let me attempt one more explanation: Wolfe's fiction does not just work on a realist level. Of course it does have elements of realism, and of course it is fantastically internally consistent (Potto's subtle clues). It also tells a powerful and (I think) important story which contains many of the Wolfean knots which we all love to unravel.

But the narrative form is not that of a realist novel. A realist novel, without going into the admittedly hideous academic debates which I would agree to despise with you, is one which has an all-powerful narrating voice outside the action, which makes the fictional world seem real, and consistent, and authoritative. Sev's narrative style does not allow this - we get all of our glimpses of Urth through him. We cannot see Urth first-hand, only through Severian's words. And words are notoriously elusive and allusive, as we all well know. Even the Book of the Long Sun, which seems to take the realist narrative form all the way through, is finally revealed to be the work of Horn. There is no safe place for us to stand back and take a broad view of Urth, for

we are constantly reliant on Sev. So Wolfe loves unreliable narrators.

My example from Gaskell was admittedly vague, but it shows another of the flaws of this kind of realist narrative - no narrator can create a whole world for you - there are always little slips. Clever authors note this and compensate in some way.

Now it often seems that in teasing out the complexities of the Urth cycle we lose sight of the big story, the narrative that works on multiple levels - of storytelling and allusion.

So to conclude - please continue exploring the minutiae of the text, but let me know how it relates to everything else. Surely Jonas' use of human body parts to rebuild himself is a further reflection of the Frankenstein story (in addition to Baldanders).

As for the religious elements. Well they're there in the text, and they are as difficult to decipher as everything else. If we concentrate on what's there and how it works with religious stories, then surely we can bypass any believers/non-believers arguments.

And Ori - your Mohammed thing sounds intriguing. More please!

Jonathan

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber'd here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
if you pardon, we will mend:
Visit Ultan's Library - A Gene Wolfe web resource
<http://members.tripod.co.uk/laidlow/index.htm>
Jonathan Laidlow
University of Birmingham, UK

Roy C. Lackey — 30 Apr 1999, 07:41 · follows Jonathan Laidlow

Jonathan Laidlow wrote:
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Apology accepted; enough said.

What does the android thread add to the reading of the Urth cycle? Very little, in and of itself. No more than the Boatman I & II, angels, Holy Katharine, the mandragora, Cabalism, florigraphy (I'll be getting to that), genealogies, or a hundred other threads. The threads have to be woven together to form the tapestry to fully appreciate the beauty of the picture they form. Wolfe's

oblique writing style leaves little alternative to untangling the skeins of the myriad mysteries in his works if they are to be understood and appreciated. I thought that was what this list was all about. If the answers were clear-cut, we wouldn't be here.

Roy