

Is Jonas a Man?

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 16 Jun 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1688>

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Roy C. Lackey — 16 Jun 1999, 02:22

I wrote:

I think the all-too-human tendency to anthropomorphize is evident both in Wolfe's writing about Jonas and our speculations about him.<<

To which corncrake, Alex, alga, and Mitchell have each responded with what amounts to variations on the same theme: that Wolfe sometimes writes about non-humans, and in doing so portrays them as if they had human characteristics, especially those characteristics which have more to do with psyche than soma, and explores the ramifications of this humanization in his fiction. Quite true; but, unless the definition of "anthropomorphize" has been subverted in recent decades to mean something other than what it once meant, I can only stand by my above statement, provincial or not. Wolfe's "complex theology" -- whatever that may be -- has no effect on the way the real world functions. Animals, cartoon characters, gods and machines, whatever fanciful human attributes they may be imbued with, do not in fact possess them.

Hey, it's only a story!: I know that and have posted in that spirit. If you want to label Wolfe's work as fantasy, then anything goes, and I withdraw my reality quibbles.

Some have gone even further, suggesting that Jonas, and other non-humans, have what is commonly known as a "soul". My post contained no theological reference, and, as I've said before, I don't want to get into a theological debate, but it seems that some here insist upon viewing Wolfe's work through the prism of religion. I cannot and will not deny that Wolfe's work contains religious elements, and his Roman Catholicism is often mentioned, but how could postulating Jonas a soul possibly be reconciled with the tenets of the R.C. Church? I don't think it can; or any other Christian church, for that matter. Just when did it happen? At the moment of concep ..., er, rather, when he left the assembly line? On the draftsman's table? When he put on a dead man's flesh? By his interactions with human beings? When? Is he contaminated by "original sin"? Do androids go to heaven? Did Jesus die for Jonas, too? Short of a papal bull mandating such an unlikely belief, I just don't see any Catholic, practicing or otherwise, accepting the notion that machines have souls. And it would be a pretty safe bet that the Pope will never make such an edict. That dogma just won't hunt.

I would think the religious-minded would have even more objections to the idea of beings-not-of-God's-creation -- man-made -- having souls than I have mentioned. That concept opens up a whole can of theological worms that the R. C. Church could never swallow.

In chapter XVIII of *_Claw_* Sev says to Jonas: "You are a machine." Wolfe pulls the rug out from under the reader here. Sev's portrayal of Jonas up to this point has lead the reader to believe "him" a "man", or, more correctly, a "human". Jonas is not. Wolfe, and other writers, use this technique in writing for a variety of purposes, but once the reader becomes aware that things are not in fact as they seemed to be, it's time to reassess the situation. To fail to do so *_is_* to miss the point. Once the reader realizes that Quetzal is not a man, it would be foolish to continue to regard him as one. However intriguing a character Quetzal or Jonas may be, they are not even human, much less men. In the case of Mr. Million, the sequence is reversed. The

reader knows early on that he is not a man, and only learns later that he used to be a man. Mr. Million is sympathetically portrayed; Maitre is not. _Yet they are the same "person"_, one housed in metal, the other in flesh. Is one better than the other? Did Mr. Million lose his humanity while a man in pursuit of immortality, then regain it after accomplishing (at least in part) his goal by pouring himself into a computer? Not in my view.

Whatever the cause of the anxiety Jonas exhibits after talking to the KLS group in the antechamber, his personality undergoes another, and, I think, more profound change after he gets zapped by the electrically-charged whip. Electrical discharges are anathema to delicate electronic components. The Claw partially heals the wounds on the flesh of his torso, but has no effect on his "mental" problems. Surprise, surprise! Of course it doesn't. It only works on creatures of flesh and blood -- even animals -- but doesn't do a thing for machines, for his "CPU", so to speak.

Is this just another of those cases where the Claw fails to heal? I don't think so. Just as in some sense the Christ-like Sev _is_ the White Fountain, _is_ the New Sun, _is_ the Conciliator, so is he the Claw. It is only when an otherwise worthless thorn is anointed with his blood after piercing his flesh that it becomes the holy relic it once was. Flesh and blood -- the wafer and the wine. "In the beginning was the Logos" ... "and the Logos was made flesh..." Transubstantiation -- but not for Jonas. Many of the obstacles to communion with God concern the perils of the flesh, perils to which ironmen are not subject, hardly an equitable playing field for humans.

Wolfe puts a human face on Jonas -- both literally and figuratively -- but it is only a veneer. Jonas is not a man.

Roy

Peter Stephenson — 16 Jun 1999, 11:46 · follows Roy C. Lackey

"Roy C. Lackey" wrote:

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I still can't really agree with this for two reasons.

In the first place, it's not at all so clear that reality is like that. There are plenty of people arguing for one extreme or another, i.e. either for a religious fundamentalist form of strong dualism, or that by next Friday someone will have invented a machine which has all (and the strong AI people do seem to mean all) the characteristics of a human being (plus a whole lot of others just to show how clever the inventor is). Plus there are plenty of possibilities in the middle depending on your attitude to emergent phenomena and what constitutes duality, humanity, `attitude', `what', `the' and every other word in the dictionary; it's not simply a question of science versus religion. In plain English, nobody knows. So I can't accept that you can so easily point the finger at possible violations of this corner of reality in a work of science fiction. (And we'd better not get started again on what constitutes realism in a work of fiction.)

In the second place Wolfe knows that perfectly well, and that there are real questions which he can't answer but can put in different ways. Mr Million is a good example; I think Wolfe is quite openly saying he doesn't know when a machine becomes a human being --- and all this goes way beyond orthodox theology. The chems on the Whorl have such complex human-like behaviour that simply to deny flat out that they can possess human characteristics seems to me to miss the whole point. The same goes for Jonas. Such beings are there in the form of a question about human nature to which, as far as I can see, neither we nor Wolfe have the answer.

corncrake

Brief bibliography (I shall be posting a test on this next week -- not):

A. Asimov, The Bicentennial Man

R. Penrose, The Emperor's New Mind; Shadows of the Mind etc. etc.

Michael Straight — 16 Jun 1999, 09:30 · follows Peter Stephenson

On Wed, 16 Jun 1999, Peter Stephenson wrote:

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The mind's I : fantasies and reflections on self and soul / composed and arranged by Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett.

Egan, Greg : _Permutation City_ and _Diaspora_

-Rostrum

Alex David Groce — 16 Jun 1999, 10:11 · follows Michael Straight

With respect to the "anthropomorphism" debate here, I think that Mr.

Million is, indeed, our best look at Wolfe's attitude: highly ambiguous--Mr. Million clearly has a strong relation to a man who once lived, and it is foolish, in the context of the story, to consider him purely as "a machine"--a glorified calculator, if you will. Certainly the Roman Catholic church hasn't pronounced that AIs have souls, or anything--but then, there haven't been any test cases of robots wanting to become Jesuits, either. The Church, on a basis similar to the ones involved in AI, doesn't approve of human cloning or alternative reproductive methods either--but certainly still considers the products to have souls. Since the process by which we

receive souls is a Mystery, its not impossible to consider that God might grant them to "machines." After all, a strong theme in Wolfe seems to be that NOTHING is really _just_ man-made. This seems to be Wolfe's take--that it's not necessarily true, but its also not impossible--if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, maybe you'd best at least consider it a duck to some extent, if you still have reservations about the proof of duck-hood. Whether Jonas is a "man" or not in the full sense of the word, he's Severian's friend, and it would certainly incline me towards the "Severian is a jerk" school if Severian ceased to consider him such once he realizes he's a machine.

Tangentially, at the rate Hofstadter, Minsky, etc. are going, I don't think we're going to have to think about this seriously anytime soon. When I started my undergraduate computer science degree, I was planning to go into AI research. I'm starting on my PhD at Carnegie Mellon this fall, and I intend to stay WAY away from the stuff (going into either formal methods or programming languages instead)--in my opinion there has been a lot of advance in brute-force and "clever" approaches to limited, game-like systems and "expert" domains, but the progress in realizing "intelligence", whatever it may be, seems to have been nil.

On Jun 16, 9:30am, Michael Straight wrote:

Subject: Re: (urth) Is Jonas a Man?

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