

de Sade, Plato, and Jack the Ripper.....

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 22 Jul 1999

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Jonathan Laidlow — 22 Jul 1999, 11:43

'With its references to DeSade, Plato and Jack the Ripper, this is a fully realized culture, utterly strange and utterly believable, as might be expected from the author of 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus'

- - Algys Budrys, review of 'Shadow of the Torturer', The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction vol.58 no. 5 May 1980.

As I became bored of de Sade (!), am ignorant of Plato, and just plain confused by Ripperology, where are these references? Wouldn't it be fun if we teased them out?

Jonathan

Visit Ultan's Library - A Gene Wolfe web resource

<http://members.tripod.co.uk/laidlow/index.htm>

Jonathan Laidlow

University of Birmingham, UK

Peter Stephenson — 22 Jul 1999, 11:49 · follows Jonathan Laidlow

"Jonathan Laidlow" wrote:

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As I became bored of de Sade (!), am ignorant of Plato, and just plain confused by Ripperology, where are these references? Wouldn't it be fun if we teased them out?

Yes, it would, although maybe he's just saying Wolfe refers to anything and everything and has picked some extreme examples, like Polonius ends his list of things the players in Hamlet can perform with `scene indivisible and poem unlimited', whatever that means. But it's fun to make dodgy hypotheses based on tenuous connections.

Plato, I suppose, means the ideal republic of the Republic, with its philosopher ruler, which isn't so far off what the autarch is (in practice, I mean, when we actually meet him --- pedants will want to wreck this by noting that we don't in Shadow, apart from an appearance in the House Azure which isn't explained till later). You could probably make an argument that the New Sun was the Form of the Good, but that would be a bit vague even for my taste. Nor does it seem particularly outré to suggest the Commonwealth is less than ideal. Was he thinking of cave dwellers, looking at the world in shadow? Or (I may well be doing Budrys a disservice) does Plato mean `some Greek guy with old-fashioned ideas about society'?

As for the others --- neither aristocratic debauchery and perversion, nor the systematic murder of prostitutes are major themes in Wolfe, although I hesitate in case anyone has a piece of fan

fiction ready. Here's my guess: both de Sade and Jack the Ripper are generic references to a decadent (in Wolfe's case 'decayed' would seem more appropriate) world of aristocratic (i.e. exultant) vice --- we already know in 'Shadow', for example, that Thecla and her relatives are concubines.

There was a 1979 film, 'Murder by Decree', in which Jack the Ripper turned out to be the Duke of Clarence, mad son of Victoria and Albert (there, I've spoilt it for you, sorry); the case was investigated by Sherlock Holmes (Christopher Plummer) and Dr Watson (James Mason). They managed to cram the freemasons, and even werewolves if the quote below is anything to go by (though I can't remember that bit), into the story, too. 'Oliver Stone would love this plot' is a comment in the IMDB review (see <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0079592>). Coming a year or so before Shadow of the Torturer, with a strange city (they always do that to Victorian London, but I suppose Dickens got there first), and a proto-Wolfean mixing of themes, it might have been enough to suggest to Budrys that 'Shadow' had Jack-the-Ripper connotations.

Holmes: We've unmasked madmen, Watson, wielding sceptres. Reason run riot. Justice howling at the moon.

corncrake

Alex Groce — 22 Jul 1999, 12:45 · follows Peter Stephenson

On Thu, 22 Jul 1999, Peter Stephenson wrote:

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I think Plato is definitely the easy one of these to find. My guess would be Severian's "We believe that we invent symbols" passage--which I showed a friend as an example of Wolfe's writing, and he said "Nice writing, but it's just Plato's old stuff about Ideals." Maybe not exactly, but certainly related.

Jack the Ripper and de Sade somehow seem more likely to be 5HC elements than in Shadow. . . Urth is more Byzantine decadent than Victorian London/Justine decadent.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." John 8:32

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<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

Michael Andre-Driussi — 22 Jul 1999, 13:13 · follows Alex Groce

Re: the Budrys line in review of THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER.

Alex Groce wrote:

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I'd agree with that. Add details like Thecla's mention of "agathodaemon." Perhaps all the Hellenic/Hellenistic terms, even the names of weapons, add to a "Greek-ness" which then led Budrys to "Plato."

For traces of de Sade, I'd say offhand: "Algedonic" and any issues of algophilia among the torturers, as discussed by Severian (although I'm not sure how much of this is done in SHADOW itself).

For traces of Jack the Ripper, I'd guess: issues of beating prostitutes, which comes up first in the cab ride and later at the brothel itself (of course, this has de Sadean applications as well). Maybe the casual mention of the murdered body near the cafe, even though this seems to be more the victim of a thuggee attack than that of a knifeman. Maybe the serial killings perpetrated by the evil twins. Maybe even the hallucinatory talking skull trick (that Agilus uses in the shop) seems like the visions of or by a ripper?

Since Budrys was only writing a brief review, it is probably nothing more than a few details such as these, which stuck in his mind as possible hooks for other readers.

=mantis=