

Dear Dorcas

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 01 Oct 1999

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Roy C. Lackey — 01 Oct 1999, 16:47

I note that none of the responses to Carlton Greene's "Dorcas as outcast?" post addressed the larger question he raised: was Dorcas really the "nice Catholic girl"--as I believe someone here once described her-- she seems to be, or was there something more sinister about her? I brought this issue up offlist to Robert Borski a few months ago but didn't post it here because I anticipated that it would go over like a--well--lead balloon. Carlton's post gives me the excuse to do so.

BTW, welcome to Carlton and the slew of new posters; where are they all coming from?

Obviously, any attempt I might make to cast Dorcas in a harsher light than the commonly perceived one will be tenuous. Any evidence from the text, if it exists, must be subtle or it would have been pointed out long ago, by someone. My thoughts proceed from the largely negative tone of the few memories and dreams she relates. Why should they be so bleak? Was she happily married? Did she want and love her child(ren), or did she have a choice in the matter? If Agia's estimate of her age is correct (16 or 17), and the age at which Agia began to menstruate (13) is typical for the times, then Dorcas must have gotten married almost as soon as she had her first period, in order for her to have been married four years at the time of her death. Not only that, but if the boatman was in his seventies when he died, then he had to be about thirty when he married the girl. The issue of their ages alone makes their relationship suspect, an issue that was entirely avoidable had Wolfe made her to be but a few years older. For her to have been nearer to Sev's own age would not have damaged the plot in any way. Therefore, Wolfe did it deliberately. Why, if not to call attention to the fact of it?

All of the dreams that she relates are dark and dismal, freighted with symbols of death. The one dream she mentions which was not nightmarish--but which she could not remember--was the one she was having when Sev woke her in the field where Dr. Talos's group was camped the morning they left Nessus by the Piteous Gate. And even that event was tainted by the fact that she was alarmed about Sev bending over her. Sev, his mouth reddened from eating a pomegranate, woke her: "I should have known from the stains on your mouth. I thought you'd been sucking blood all night. ... "Well, you did look like a black bat bending over me." Indeed, Dorcas seems to have something of an obsession with bats, especially blood bats.

Following their reunion at the House Absolute, she and Sev talked together in the Shakespearean garden, where she related to him two recurrent dreams. The first of these dreams is the one in which she becomes aware that people regard her as "an unclean spirit who has wrapped itself in the woman's body they see." (II, XXII) In her dream she enters "a tiny shop conducted by an old man and an old woman." The old woman is making lace and "I hear the sound her thread makes behind me as it is pulled through the work." Sev asks her what she is there to buy. "Tiny clothes." "Doll's clothing, perhaps." But when she goes to pay for them her money changes to a lump of filth and the hissing of the thread stops. The thread is a rather obvious reference to the thread of life spun and cut by the Greek Fates, but whose thread? Notice that the tiny clothes, while of a doll's proportions, are not specifically said to be for a doll.

The size of the clothes--half a span--would be too small for a full-term baby. But if she has had a miscarriage--whether unintended or not--or an abortion, the tiny clothes would be of a proper size. If the tiny clothes had been intended for a doll it should not have the emotional impact that it does for her. Indeed, the dream evokes much more the sense of guilt than grief, as does the fact that the doll-related dreams are recurrent. Her sub-conscious mind is preoccupied with the subject, not just the nightmarish details of her interment.

Her marriage may well not have been a romantic one; just as Ouen was farmed out as a potboy at the age of ten, she may not have had a choice. Life is cheap in the Commonwealth and familial bonds even weaker. She may well have been forced into marriage as a child and resented it. She probably had no choice about becoming pregnant. Either she, or her husband, may not have wanted or been able to support more mouths to feed. Who knows what problems and disagreements they may have had? But her conscience is bothering her about something, something to do with a baby.

The issue of age is raised once more in the second dream she relates. She dreams of being "in a boat poled across a spectral lake" and "An old man poles it, and I lie at his feet." What prompted this dream image? Her dream cannot be prescient, because the dream is long after the fact of her interment. She can have no idea how much time has elapsed between her death and resurrection, even after figuring out that that is what has happened. The old man can't be her husband, because he wasn't an old man when she died. We have no reason to believe he even owned a boat then: he was a shopkeeper. Who was this old man in the dream? The Lake's equivalent of a mortician who poled the boat she was "buried" from? The other elements in the dream do not fit that theory: "Just as we are about to touch shore, I fall from the boat, but the old man does not see me, and as I sink through the water I know that he has never known I was there at all." Yet it *was* near the shore where her body was found--and her husband couldn't find it in forty years of searching, though he was present when she was "buried". Something is wrong here: it doesn't add up.

After relating the dreams she remarks that the people in her dream may be right, that in some sense she *is* a "foul specter". Sev answers: "You could never be a foul specter, or anything foul." She replies: "Oh, yes," she said seriously ... "Oh, yes I could, Severian. Just as you can be what they call you. What you sometimes are." To interpret her statement as meaning simply that all people have a dark side would have her stating a platitude; she has to be implying something more tangible.

The multifarious use of symbols in Wolfe's work being so pervasive, it seems to me that when he repeats or otherwise reinforces an image, that he means something by it. My next point against Dorcas is one of these. (II, XXII) "The whip mark Dorcas had carried from the Piteous Gate burned on her cheek like a brand." This comment comes immediately after she related the dream about the old man in the boat. Who else in the novels has branded cheeks? Morweena. For what crime was she branded and killed? Killing her husband and child.

She then recalled to Sev Dr. Talos's labeling him as Death, which Sev said was a metaphor. She said it was a bad metaphor and, as they were walking back to the others, Sev wondered to himself if "Dr. Talos's calling Dorcas "Innocence" had not been a metaphor of the same kind."

Bad dreams, dolls, and bats all come together later in CLAW, on the night that Jolenta suffered what turned out to be a mortal injury. While Sev was lusting after the undine, Dorcas had another dream involving dolls. (II, XXVII) She enters a toyshop with shelves lined with dolls and a well in the center of the floor with more dolls on the coping. She says "I remember thinking that my baby was too young for dolls, but they were so pretty, and I had not had one since I was a little girl,..." Then, the doll turns into Jolenta. That the Jolenta-doll falls down a well in the

dream establishes, one, that Jolenta was on her mind and, two, that Jolenta was cast into a life-threatening scenario. Unless we are to grant that Dorcas is prescient--the dream coming before the knowledge of the alleged bat bite--then the dream indicates to me that she had hostile feelings for Jolenta. Only two days before Sev had had sex with Jolenta. It was her relating two incidents from her girlhood which causes Sev--and the reader--to leap to the unwarranted assumption that Jolenta had been bitten by a blood bat. The assumption is unwarranted because their geographical location and the behavior of the supposed blood bat does not agree with evidence presented elsewhere in the text. One of the incidents she relates is that, when a young child, someone used to frighten her by telling her about blood bats. The second was when she was older and a common bat got into the house. Someone killed it and she asked her "father if it were a blood bat, and if there were really any such things." He told her that there were, but that they lived in the north "in the steaming forests at the center of the world." (II, XXVIII) She was alone with Jolenta when the wounds were made. The Cumaen indicated that Jolenta should recover from her wounds, just as Sev did when he was later bitten by a true blood bat, but she didn't. And when Sev reached the roof of the tomb following the seance, Jolenta was dead and Dorcas was alone with her and bending over the lifeless body.

At the inn in Thrax Sev was again bending over Dorcas when she woke, which she remarked on. He then recalled to her the earlier incident in Nessus, but this time used the word vampire to describe how he must have looked to her. When asked by Agia, in the Botanic Gardens, what was the last thing she remembered, Dorcas answered: "Sitting by a window ... There were pretty things in the window. Trays and boxes, and a rood." Was this last to keep the vampires away? And which side of the window was she on? Why wasn't her weighted body where it was supposed to be? Why couldn't Caron (the name I am using for the boatman), who searched over and over almost daily for forty years, who had pulled some of the bodies up so often that he knew them by sight, find his wife's body? He was present when she was interred. He had a "map". The most obvious answer is--she wasn't there.

Caron, for all the sympathetic portrayal of his searching for his too-soon dead wife for forty years, has always struck me as a ne'er-do-well. Besides marrying a child half his age, he sponged off her family's labors, then, when she died, squandered whatever fortunes they had not long after her death. If Dorcas died giving birth to a second child, as the text implies, then he did not keep the child, for whatever reasons, because Ouen has no memory of a sibling. Did the baby live? What became of the child? Ouen, presumably because he was old enough to get by without his mother, Caron retained until the age of ten, then farmed out as a potboy, never, apparently, to see him again until Ouen sought him out when he was grown. That act does not say much for Caron's fatherly instincts. Yes, Caron may have been poor and unable to afford to keep the boy, but that seems to be largely his own fault. He makes a show of lamenting his dear-departed wife, but admits to not retaining so much as a nail from their old home/shop. He even sinks so low as to hock his last memento of her, a locket with her pictures in it. That is not the act of a grieving man devoted to his wife's memory. He managed, after all, to obtain the resources to acquire a boat after she died, to search for her body with. His quest for her body seems to me to have its origins more in guilt--or fear--than grief. He is haunted by the memory of her eyes popping open when her body hit the water; his conscience will not let him rest until he sees her good and dead. Was he complicitous somehow in her death, whether overtly or by omission? We may never know, but his conscience is bothering him about something, because even if she wasn't dead when she was interred, she would have been soon after being sunk in the lake. When he can't find the body where it was supposed to be when he first looked for it, he becomes obsessed with finding it. Why? Is he worried that she is still alive in some sense and will come back for retribution? Was it just coincidence that, when Sev last saw Dorcas, the old man was dead and she was kneeling beside his body in their old home? While it is certainly possible that the old man just happened to die about the same time that Dorcas found him, it strains credulity. It smacks of melodrama. Did he die of natural causes, or was an old score

settled? Note that when she talks to Sev of returning to Nessus to find out what she can of her old life, she mentions her male child--but not her husband. Curiously, she also never brings up the subject of how she came to be in the lake. From her perspective, if she had been truly dead, no time should have passed between her death and resurrection. Once she regained her memories, as she was rapidly doing after seeing the chair in Thrax, for her only a few months subjective time have elapsed since she died. She *has* to know *something* about her own death--but never mentions the second child she supposedly died giving birth to. Very curious. Yet she remembers living above the shop with her husband and first-born child.

How did she find him, anyway? The quarter where they had lived has been long deserted--who was there to inquire of? The only clue she had to her past came from the note that Sev intercepted at the Inn Of Lost Loves, yet she clearly had not sought out Ouen. In my post about flowers I raised some questions about the logistics of how the old man's body wound up on a bier on the second floor of their old, decayed home. Where did little Dorcas get the strength?

Dorcas is sympathetically portrayed throughout the text as an innocent child. For reasons not explained in the text she was allowed by her family to wed when she could barely have reached puberty, and was soon a mother. She was still a child when she died, as far as I am concerned, and why she died is unclear. The only testimony in the text is Ouen's statement that his father said she died in childbirth. Women die in childbirth every day, especially in primitive societies, but they do so at a far higher rate in fiction than in reality. It's practically a cliché in literature and films. In any event, it may just have been a simplistic, catchall answer that Caron gave Ouen to shut him up when the boy asked about his mother. Caron didn't mention to Sev and Agia how Cas died, or even that they had any children, only that they were married for nearly four years. For a man so preoccupied with his dead wife, he seems to have been strangely reticent about her with the one person in the world who would want to know all about her--her son, Ouen.

Most people who die in Nessus are not interred in the Lake of Birds. Why did Caron--if the decision was his--elect to inter her there, rather than in her native soil? Vampires traditionally do not like water, and Dorcas was deathly afraid of water. Why *did* her eyes pop open when she hit the water? Her eyelids had been cemented shut, and even if she had been in a "com'er", it isn't easy to force enough of anything down someone's throat to keep their body in place in water. The act of stuffing the lead shot down her throat by itself would probably kill her, if she wasn't already dead.

There is not enough direct evidence in the text for me to assert that Dorcas was a vampire or that she and/or her husband were somehow involved in the death of a baby, but the subject of bats comes up too often to be dismissed out of hand and the death of Jolenta is suspect, as is the timing of Caron's. Then there is the question of just how and why Dorcas died and why Hildegrin was on the scene when Sev stumbled onto her body. He said he had done a favor or three for the Cumaen, who is linked to Inire, who is an agent of Yesod, whose members know--and manipulate--future events. It was no accident that Sev fell in the lake just where Dorcas' body was. I do suggest that Caron couldn't find the body in all those years because it wasn't there. Her body was put there, but whether by an agent of Yesod or an undine, is unclear. And there is still the mystery of what happened between chapters, from the moment that a hand was pulling Sev *down* in the water until Dorcas' hand was pulling him *up* from the water.

Roy

Very interesting idea. On the plus side, I think we can safely place the idea of the vampire as one of Wolfe's major motifs, only subtly present in New Sun, more overt (and by the end one of the major mysteries) in Long Sun, and now becoming a central theme of Short Sun.

Clearly, there is something more than is evident going on with Dorcas--there are enough hints and clues (especially in the strange scene(s) in Old Nessus) to suggest that an important and (even for Wolfe) difficult to elucidate mystery is at work. I also think that it is likely it casts Dorcas in a less innocent light than might be obvious--Severian's comment about bad metaphors is apropos, indeed.

On the other hand, the vampire hypothesis seems to be very tenuous--and I think some of the dream interpretation elements linked in are highly questionable. The arguments based on Dorcas' dreams NOT being prescient are the root of the problem--I think that in BOTNS this is an unsafe assumption. Because of her interaction with Severian/the Claw and her resurrection, Dorcas is quite possibly on a little more "stuck" in time than Severian himself, who is a fountain of prophetic dreams. The dream of being "in a boat poled across a spectral lake" is most easily explained as a metaphor for Charon's search for her--the fact that she is with him indicates that somehow she has been right under his nose all along, and is a measure of the frustration of her watery death (and Caron's frustration). It is true that Dorcas should have no direct knowledge of this, but to assume that her dreams are not capable of penetrating things she has no normal way of knowing is, in the context of BOTNS, an unsafe assumption.

Speaking of ages, I think it would be interesting to try and gauge the best estimate we can make of the ages of the various players in BOTNS. Roy's estimate for Dorcas is plausible, although I tend to suspect that she looks younger than she is, and this has lowered Agia's estimate (she also has some motive for (a) jealousy of someone younger and (b) trying to make her look like a mere child and thus perhaps undesirable to Severian). I think the other easiest people to peg are Severian and the Ag- twins (and little Severian, of course).

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

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Roy C. Lackey — 02 Oct 1999, 04:30 · follows Alex David Groce

Alex wrote:

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In the same scene that Agia made her estimate of Dorcas' age, Severian guessed Dorcas to be 18 or 19. Neither estimate changes the fact that she was a teenage bride and mother, half Caron's age when they married. Someone here (mantis?), IIRC, seemed to think Severian was 23, but that age is nowhere given in the text. I think the reasoning was that, after ruling for ten years, Sev should be 33, the age traditionally given for Jesus at the time of the crucifixion. I think. Myself, I thought him to be a few years less than that. As for Agia (and Agilus), Hildegren makes several cutting remarks about her that indicate he believes her to be a seasoned tramp and says to Sev: "...you're a sight younger than what she is, for all you was probably born only a

couple years sooner." The wording is awkward, but I think he meant that Sev was a couple of years the younger physically, but a babe-in-the-woods compared to Agia. But if "sooner" is taken literally, then Sev is a couple of years the older. I would guess the twins to be anywhere from 22 to 24. Little Sev is judged by Sev to be "about of that growth when, if he had been one of our apprentices, he would first have entered Master Palaemon's schoolroom--that is to say, he was old enough to walk well, and to talk sufficiently to understand and to make himself understood." About five, I think.

Roy

Jon Camfield — 04 Oct 1999, 19:36 · follows Roy C. Lackey

[I've been ABEND almost a year, my apologies. I've just recently started reading again; the Dorcas thread caught my eye. Re/Hi everybody; greets to the new folks]

The early evidence in the book lead us to believe (our first read through, many year ago) that Dorcas was never actually dead, just in a coma. We later realize that she was brought back to life by Sev's unwitting use of the Claw.

What if both are true? What if she was in fact merely in a coma when she was leaded and drowned? And what if she awoke from that coma, spewed some of the shot so as to be light enough to move from her marked location, and then died? This would explain a handful of events; her dream of being poled across the lake, the lack of much shot in her stomach later on, her not being in the right place in the lake...

Now, as for Dorcas' history... her husband seemed incredibly fond of her at least, poling for her for so many years. There's something to be said for that level of devotion.

I had always wondered at Wolfe's very brief mention of the Virgin who would walk around Nessus unmolested. This story popped back up into my mind in relation to Dorcas--what if she had given up that or a similar position to marry, and was looked down upon for it? I can't offer any evidence, and, in truth, I like the suggestion she had an abortion--possibly due to poverty.

Isn't there a syndrome, TSS or somesuch, that can result from unsanitary abortions? Couldn't it lead to a coma...

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Web R&D; eCertain.com

Channel Manager, Undernet #Poetry: www.tripod.com/~ircpoetry, 1995-1999

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"A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, construct a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, and die gallantly. Specialization is for insects." --Robert A. Heinlein,
_The_Notebooks_of_Lazarus_Long_