

What is a lie?

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 08 Nov 1999

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Jeremy W. Crampton — 08 Nov 1999, 13:22

Jim Henley:

Jim, it seems to me we can go in one of two ways here. We can hash the ins and outs of these examples from Chaps 1-2 (or others if people come up with any), or we can state our position on Clute's oft-repeated claim "Sev. is a liar". I was trying to say I agree with Clute and show what evidence could be produced to support him. Granted, data is needed either way, but perhaps we can offer our assumptions first and identify difficulties.

And there are yet further levels, which I was (dimly!) aware of in writing my post. For example, if we have two contradictory statements (eg., his knowledge of his mother) which one do we choose as true? That he remembers breast feeding or that he never knew his parents? Was he misleading us, or misleading himself? Is he even aware his memory is imperfect (thanks for pointing that one out)? And how much of this is the author's (Wolfe) use of narrative thrust, skillful foreshadowing, or the exigencies of literary tradition?

Well, presumably one answer to these questions is: the same way a scientist weighs conflicting observations; by seeing which one fits with the most observations already made. (This answer has its own difficulties of course.) Another answer is to check (like a scientist might) with prevailing opinion, and this raises the question for the community:

-->is it generally accepted that Sev. lies (and if so, how often, how seriously, of his free will or under duress, for selfish reasons or altruistic, why/why not, etc.)? This is a genuine question!

Furthermore, are we in agreement on the implications of the statement "Sev. is a liar"? To me, this does not make him less inspiring or appealing. Seems to me the error is to sanctify Sev. (and Silk?) and thus separate them from humanity. But here I suspect one's religious affiliations creep in, ie., the text is always interpreted in context.

Disclaimer: I personally came to my relationship with the statement "Sev. is a liar" not just through textual evidence, but a larger set of my personal beliefs ("people lie but that doesn't make them necessarily bad--it depends, kinda thing"), my *aesthetic* understanding of the novels and Sev. (what makes good art is an unreliable lying narrator not a flawless one), Wolfe's interviews and what I think Wolfe is trying to do (here I could be wrong, could be right!), my readings of Wolfe's source material (esp. ancient Greece), and FINALLY I think Foucault had some jolly good points in his article on the "death of the author"! :P)

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Michael Straight — 08 Nov 1999, 14:02 · follows Jeremy W. Crampton

On Mon, 8 Nov 1999, Jeremy W. Crampton wrote:

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This line of reasoning seems bizarre to me. Even if Severian does remember breastfeeding, would you really label this statement a contradiction, much less a lie? "I have memories of breastfeeding, but I never knew my mother." Seems perfectly reasonable and straightforward to me.

-Rostrum