

the point of it all

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 09 Nov 1999

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Clifford Drane — 09 Nov 1999, 03:58

Daniel wrote, long ago...

Indeed, in Severian's own time, there are different types of stories. There is the story told by Loyal to the Group of Seventeen, for example. There is Foila's story, which resembles a medieval romance. There is Melito's story, which is like a classical fable. There is also Hallvard's story, which is realism. Note that Severian never gets the chance to judge between these stories; nor does he tell the reader what judgement he might make. The implication is that all four are worthy.

I disagree that the implication (hence lesson of this mini-story) is that all four are worthy - even if they are. I have always thought that this story illustrates the fact that there is not always a happy ending, and in many cases, no 'ending' at all. This, to me, is the ultra-refined meaning of the Urth Books. The Grand Unification Theory, if you will. :)

It's very Asian, almost Zen - the meaning of life is meaninglessness. The storytelling contest has no end - and that IS the end.

The Urth books are filled to the brim with nuances, mysteries, etc. which we love love love to ponder on this board - and the books seem to illustrate the point that life is full of things we will never fully grasp, chains of events of which we will never understand the links (no matter how powerful we become). Gene has created a narrative about an imperfect world told by an imperfect author, imperfectly. Just like real life.

I've caught myself digging through the archives, searching for the answer to some riddle, with the overriding thought that someday, this will all become clear. But it won't - and THAT is the point.

Well, in MY opinion. :)

Cliff Drane

Daniel Fusch — 09 Nov 1999, 05:16 · follows Clifford Drane

Well, argued, Cliff.

But I disagree.

(snip)

"I have always thought that this story illustrates the fact that there is not always a happy ending, and in many cases, no 'ending' at all."

Well, if this is the case, then why does this mini-story end with Severian's promise to Foila that he will record, remember, and tell the four stories? By doing this, he ensures that Foila and the

rest will live on--will have immortality, via the stories. They will be remembered, even if only in the sense that their stories are remembered. This is Literature in a nutshell--the stories are to be preserved and retold. And because of this, Foila's death is not a complete end. The storyteller has achieved immortality through her story.

So I still argue that the point here has to do with storytelling.

(snip)

"This, to me, is the ultra-refined meaning of the Urth Books. The Grand Unification Theory, if you will."

I think agree with your notion that the vast and intricate mysteries of Severian's narrative are meant as a Zen-like comment on our final inability to pin down and define life. It seems to me that it is also a comment on storytelling (again!). Either a) there are mysteries because we can never fully know the whole story, or b) there are mysteries because a story can never be wholly and completely told by the storyteller.

In a way, this is saying the same thing as "life is full of things we will never fully grasp" -- but I think this is a commentary on storytelling, as well. After all, storytelling is the human attempt to define life and invest life with meaning. If we can never fully grasp life, it is because we can never fully tell our stories. Modernism is an exploration of this concept (here comes The Sound and the Fury again!).

If you like, the four stories represent four perspectives on life. No story is judged above the others because all four are valid, worthwhile, useful, and beautiful perspectives.

I think this part of Wolfe's work owes more to modernism than to zen, though.

It may be that in the end is merely ridiculous to say "It's not about life; it's about storytelling" or "It's not about storytelling; it's about life"
-- because those two subjects are really one subject.

Back to you, Cliff.

Alex David Groce — 09 Nov 1999, 10:25 · follows Daniel Fusch

It's very Asian, almost Zen - the meaning of life is meaninglessness. The storytelling contest has no end - and that IS the end.

Ah, perhaps--but I think a better statement for Wolfe's work would be: the meaning of life is that there's a lot more meaning to life than you're ever likely to manage to grasp -- the story goes on and on and on -- and that IS not the end*.

* But hints of eschatology lurk in the background, so it's not an Arabian nightmare kind of "there is no end"--there is and end, the line that Dr. Talos talks about in "Of Bad Gold and Burning", my favorite chapter of CITADEL.

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

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