

Messianic?

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 18 Nov 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1962>

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Roy C. Lackey — 18 Nov 1999, 16:29

Alex wrote:

This interpretation of BOTNS can be supported from the text, with a lot of work, but I strongly disagree with it. It seems to me that you're seeing small and largely disputable points in Severian's narrative as evidence that (A) Severian is a bald-faced liar and the narrative we have is not merely incomplete, but actually a complete distortion of actual events we can never, in any way, know, and (B) the cosmic plan outlined (why we should believe in it at all, I'm unsure--why not say Severian is a poor torturer's apprentice who, in a fever, dreams he is a savior of the world?) is in fact the work of what seems almost a fallen angel, or, perhaps, as others have stated some time ago on the list, a kind of sneaky colonization plan by Empire-builders from Yesod :).<<

(A) is too strong a summation of my approach. I think the text is roughly accurate--so far as it is given--but Severian deceives himself often enough that his judgements can't be taken at face value. As he says to B,F,&O when questioned about what he had gained from his predecessor besides his memories:

For the first time in many years, I felt the blood rise in my cheeks. "I lied," I said. "I am he, just as I am Thecla. You three have been my friends when I had few, and I should not lie to you, though so often I must lie to myself." (V, V)

When he lies to himself he distorts reality, or rather, his perception of it. When he then relates his perceptions to the reader he is lying to the reader by commission; when he fails to relate something altogether he is lying by omission. I cannot seriously entertain the notion that he lies to himself but tells the truth to the reader.

I'm not making these quotes up. Wolfe put them in for a reason, I suppose, not just to pad the text. We can argue about which things Severian relates that he is not telling the truth about, to what extent he is not telling the truth, why he left out something that obviously should have been in his account, but I don't think it can be doubted that not everything he tells us is the truth.

Sometimes what he tells the reader isn't true, but he isn't lying; he's just too dense to understand what is going on around him. He then misleads the reader by making unwarranted assumptions.

(B) is an interpretation advanced by Ori Kowarski. I don't entirely agree with it--but arguments can be put forth in support of it. I'll leave that to him to pursue if he wishes, but I will point out one thing which has been mentioned before here, which is hard to ignore.

Remember the Infernal imagery in URTH right before Sev and Gunnie left Yesod? Sev would not recognize it as such--but the reader does. Maybe Sev finally figured it out. Maybe he left things out of his manuscript because they were the evidentiary links in the chain that bound him to his

destiny as a hapless pawn in a cosmic game--which is just how Captain Tzadkiel spoke of Sev and his kind when he last saw her. (V, XXIV) He didn't even get his Gethsemane scene; he hadn't a prayer of passing the cup, because the game was rigged before he was even born. The Yesodians would keep picking him up, dusting him off, and sending him back again and again until he got it Right.

Your "fallen angel" comment may be closer to the truth than you think. Why *did* Wolfe put the Dante bits in? Lucifer, too, was a star, the "light bringer": "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" (Isaiah XIV, 12)

[snip]

In fact, given this approach, I'm curious--could you elaborate on what you see BOTNS as "about," in this case? It strikes me that most of the underlying themes I see in it are undercut by this interpretation (which reminds me of the "Weer is a mass-murderer, and kills EVERYONE in Cassionville" version of PEACE).<<

[snip]

Yes, well, hmm, unlike Weer, Severian really *did* kill everyone on Urth. <g> Given what I know of Wolfe--strictly from his work and transcripts of interviews and some personal anecdotes from people on this list--it's hard to interpret TBOTNS other than in a religious sense. The Biblical elements are certainly there, but I have a very difficult time seeing Sev in a Christ-like, Christic, Everyman, or even Christian role. Not being religious myself, he shouldn't be able to offend my religious sensibilities, because I don't have any. But Wolfe manages it with Sev. I've read the BIBLE, I recognize the parallels, and I've read the arguments and explications tendered on this list in support of that reading. I remain far from convinced. I'm even rather surprised that devout Christians aren't outraged at comparisons of Sev to Jesus. Perhaps they are; this list is hardly representative of the people who read Wolfe. To me, despite the parallels, Sev of the Urth Cycle is about as far from the character of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels as two members of the same species can be.

You know all the points where they correspond; let me point out some rather glaring contrasts. Jesus never killed anyone. He didn't have sex with every female he could get his hands on. He knew who his parents were. He didn't earn his daily bread by being very good at hurting people. He was not a soldier. He was not a temporal ruler. He never slept with his grandmother. He didn't have a sister or wife, etc., etc.

In the Christian tradition Jesus suffered and died to save mankind. Severian the messiah destroyed mankind, then got to go sit on the beach drinking margaritas and watching the girls go by, writing his memoirs and basking in his new-found godhead. I just don't see any meaningful comparison, in or out of a religious context. Ushas isn't even pie-in-the-sky for all those corpses floating on the tide; they're just dead.

If Wolfe intended Sev to be seen as Christ-like, why make him so unchristian? If Tzadkiel and his followers were meant to be angelic, why make them liars and deceivers, puppet masters in a shadowy theater? Why the images of hell in Yesod? Wolfe is at least sending mixed messages.

Given that the manuscripts are the only extant artifacts of an otherwise unknowable universe/world, Sev's word is all we have to judge them by. I used the term "literary solipsism" because that was the phrase used by Alex in his Nov. 5 post to describe the de facto situation.

Sev at times addresses the hypothetical reader of his manuscripts directly to somehow qualify what he has written or will write. This serves to remind the reader that *all* that he writes is

addressed to that reader and that all of his writing is qualified--by his abilities, his perceptions, his understanding. When he writes that he lies to himself, the reader is given warning that all that he relates cannot be trusted to be true. People who lie to themselves do so because they cannot face the truth. Human nature is such that people lie to themselves about things that they regard as important to their sense of self-identity, self-worth, the core values of their being. This colors and otherwise distorts their worldview; all that they perceive is filtered through that lens. This causes people to see things not as they are, but as their ego will allow them to see them. If Sev has to lie to himself then he has no choice but to lie to the reader when he relates something that conflicts with his preferred view of what he is relating. And the fiction is that in his manuscripts he only related what he thought was important to his life, from torturer's apprentice to godling on the beaches of Ushas.

When his reader reads his own statements that he is a liar, that he has lied and will lie, even to the masters of his universe, is he telling the truth? Or is that just another lie?

Roy

Michael Straight — 19 Nov 1999, 08:53 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On Thu, 18 Nov 1999, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

When his reader reads his own statements that he is a liar, that he has lied and will lie, even to the masters of his universe, is he telling the truth?

Or is that just another lie?

But if Severian is lying, then he must be telling the truth, but if he's telling the truth, then he must be lying, but if he is lying, then he must be telling truth, but if he's telli- ***NOMAD GO BOOM!***