

Mankind

The Urth list — 11 messages, 9 voices, 22 Nov 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1973>

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Roy C. Lackey — 22 Nov 1999, 17:45

Apparently, the Hierogrammates intend to exact revenge/retribution on all of mankind, not just Urth. From (V, XIX), Sev to Apheta:

"Is Urth really so important to you?"

She shook her head.

"Then why bother with it or me?"

"Because your race is important to us. It would be far less laborious if we could deal with it all at once, but you are sown over tens of thousands of worlds, and we cannot."

She then goes on to explain the difficulties of space/time travel, hence why "it" can't be dealt with all at once. I think this answers the question of who crippled the Old Sun. Will all the suns of all the other worlds also develop black holes? Will the Cataclysm wrecked on Urth be visited on all the other worlds of the imperium? Seems like it. This implies a slaughter of life unparalleled by even a comic-book villain. Are there thousands of other Sev-like dupes on as many worlds?

If, according to the fundamental Christian tenet that the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ was a one-time-only historical event, then it follows that any other beings in the universe cannot have known Jesus. Never having known Jesus, whatever mean-old-Man may have done to them, they cannot be regarded as equivalent to humans, no matter how human-like they may be or become--rather like how the Pelerines viewed the Ascians. God gave Man dominion over all the lower lifeforms. To scourge Mankind because they wronged another lifeform would seem to me a violation of the unique covenant of God with Man, which was signed in the blood of Christ.

How then can the Hieros, a higher, or at least more powerful lifeform than Man, be any less culpable for doing to Man what Man is being punished for doing? Whence the moral authority? The Increate? This is at best cosmic hypocrisy. Or is this another case of "do not as I do; do as I say do", which is a variation of the "might makes right" ethos.

Roy

Ron Hale-Evans — 22 Nov 1999, 16:39 · follows Roy C. Lackey

At 05:45 PM 11/22/99 -0600, Roy wrote:

[snip]

How then can the Hieros, a higher, or at least more powerful lifeform than Man, be any less culpable for doing to Man what Man is being punished for doing? Whence the moral authority? The Increate? This is at best cosmic hypocrisy. Or is this another case of "do not as I do; do as I say do",

which is a variation of the "might makes right" ethos.

I think this falls under "willing, temporary suspension of disbelief." The same problems that many on the list see with the plotline of the Book of the New Sun also apply to, er, the plotline of the Bible. Would I worship a God who behaved as does the God in the Bible? No, and I am not obliged to assent to statements made by anyone who both believes the Bible and believes that their God is good.

But Wolfe has created a "secondary world" in the Tolkien sense. In a very real way, it is *Wolfe* who is the God of Yesod and Briah. The Increate that he describes is really just Wolfe's hand puppet -- just another character in the book! Wolfe tells us that (a) the Increate is good, and (b) the Increate sees fit to destroy Urth. A contradiction? Maybe, but we have to accept it in the context of the book, because those are the premises of the book. To deny them would be equivalent to chanting "Death of the Author, Death of the Author" under one's breath and deliberately reading, say, the Foundation Trilogy as merely being the demented ravings of Hari Seldon, who is actually a patient in a mental hospital on Trantor (or better, Earth). This kind of Borgesian PoMo deconstruction and reconstruction can be done -- nothing is easier -- but it is far more interesting to me (in this context, at least) to try to understand what the author is saying, or trying to say. Wolfe obviously has something to say, and to deliberately read his book in a perverse way is equivalent to handing a salt shaker to someone asking for water. You might have your reasons for doing so, but they have very little to do with rational communication.

I despise the Bible's Book of Revelations and think the world would have been a lot better off if that particular opium nightmare had been omitted from the canon, as it almost was. But because TBOTNS is such a rollicking good read, I'm willing to suspend my disbelief for the duration, temporarily accept that there are Great Beasts in the oceans, etc., and dig in.

This, incidentally, is what I was trying to get across to Ori the other day.

Ron H-E

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Jim Henley — 22 Nov 1999, 21:00 · follows Ron Hale-Evans

-----Original Message-----

From: [urth-errors at lists.best.com](mailto:urth-errors@lists.best.com) [[mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com](mailto:urth-errors@lists.best.com)]On
Behalf Of Roy C. Lackey

Apparently, the Hierogrammates intend to exact
revenge/retribution on all of
mankind, not just Urth. From (V, XIX), Sev to Apheta:

"Is Urth really so important to you?"

She shook her head.

"Then why bother with it or me?"

"Because your race birthed Ori and Roy, our sworn

enemies. We will stop at nothing to destroy them -
NOTHING I TELL YOU!!! BWA-HA-HA!!!

"Excuse me. I got carried away. Would you like to
have sex with me now?"

"Do ducks quack?"

"Took my pistol and a hundred dollar bill
I had everything I needed to get me killed"
-- Steve Earle

Ori Kowarsky — 22 Nov 1999, 19:52 · follows Jim Henley

Ron Hale-Evans wrote:

"But Wolfe has created a "secondary world" in the Tolkien sense. In a very real way, it is *Wolfe* who is the God of Yesod and Briah. The Increate that he describes is really just Wolfe's hand puppet -- just another character in the book! Wolfe tells us that (a) the Increate is good, and (b) the Increate sees fit to destroy Urth. A contradiction? Maybe, but we have to accept it in the context of the book, because those are the premises of the book. To deny them would be equivalent to chanting "Death of the Author, Death of the Author" under one's breath and deliberately reading, say, the Foundation Trilogy as merely being the demented ravings of Hari Seldon, who is actually a patient in a mental hospital on Trantor (or better, Earth). This kind of Borgesian PoMo deconstruction and reconstruction can be done -- nothing is easier -- but it is far more interesting to me (in this context, at least) to try to understand what the author is saying, or trying to say. Wolfe obviously has something to say, and to deliberately read his book in a perverse way is equivalent to handing a salt shaker to someone asking for water. You might have your reasons for doing so, but they have very little to do with rational communication."

Well, I don't know about that, Ron. I understand your point, but I don't think what I'm saying is quite the same as "how could that heartless Tolkien create a world where Sauron could threaten those wee Hobbits?". Nor am I talking about whether in our universe there is a God, or a just God, or how bad things happen to good people or whatnot.

I'm just saying why not re-read The Book of the New Sun without interpreting its events the way you're somehow *supposed* to, although I don't know where this supposed obligation comes from -- Wolfe's text is wonderfully ambiguous and only has an "official" meaning because the author or some of his readership seems determined to impose one from outside of the text. Why not concentrate on what is actually there in terms of what Sev relates to us of what he actually sees and hears and what is said to him and by whom on its own terms, as opposed to assuming that it's all one big wink at us here in the 20th century? TBOTNS is obviously written by an American male of the Catholic faith in the late 20th century, I can read the *dust jacket* to figure that out; but if you suspend your disbelief and allow that Wolfe is doing what he claims to be doing, namely translating Sev's memoirs, then maybe what's going on is not a medieval morality play meant to entertain and comfort us with a space age Paroussia but perhaps is something completely other, and when we're quite done patting ourselves on the back for catching the biblical and Catholic allusions why are we so content to stop there and not continue digging behind *that* false facade of angels and devils to get at what the book might be saying perhaps even in spite of itself? How many masks do the hierodules actually wear, in the end?

Ori

Alex David Groce — 23 Nov 1999, 11:18 · follows Ori Kowarsky

But Ori, as I pointed out, I read BOTNS when I didn't know anything about Wolfe (other than, from having stumbled across "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" novella in an anthology, that he could write like nobody's business) and I came to an interpretation that's pretty much what Wolfe & us conspirators claim is the "official version." Am I just naive? Or did I come to BOTNS with a different metaphysics, and so reach what is the natural, textual interpretation for anyone of that metaphysics (and, apparently, some other people--I know several atheists who agree with my general view of what BOTNS is about, they just think Wolfe's created world is a lot less like ours than I think it is). It's your claim that anyone reading BOTNS in an "unbiased" fashion will come to see things your way that I disagree with so strongly.

Mind you, it IS pretty ambiguous--if I'm not mistaken, Nutria, who isn't coming from all -that- far away from my POV on things, at first thought the whole thing was about a Gnostic & self-devouring world and that Severian was meant as a grim parody of Christ. Correct me if I'm wrong. But this doesn't mean that "all right thinking folks who don't close their eyes and shut their ears will see the evil conspiracy lurking behind the hieros."

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

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Ouroboros — 23 Nov 1999, 09:24 · follows Alex David Groce

Ori wrote:

"...why are we so content to stop [with the

"official" meaning of the author]and not continue digging behind *that* false facade of angels and devils to get at what the book might be saying perhaps even in spite of itself?"<<<<<

Because we don't need Wolfe's work to do that. We can just write our own books to investigate those questions. Not a bad recommendation, but the reason this list is so active is because Wolfe intentionally put so many real live puzzles, flourishes, and "Easter eggs" in his work. And because as we originally read the story we recognized that stimuli was flooding over us faster than we could comprehend it and now we're still trying to comprehend it.

It's cool that you can read TBOTNS without caring what the author was getting at. I bet you listen to "American Pie" and Bob Dylan songs and Beatles songs without ever stopping to wonder what the writers were actually trying to say. Undoubtably, when someone tells you a joke you ask him not to finish it so you can make up your own punch-lines. Nothing wrong with

that, but you don't need anyone else to do that. Myself, I side with Carlton Greene when he said, "...the fact that many of the explanations...are shadowy, unclear, or apparently paradoxical given current scientific understanding does not mean that we as readers are not intended to, and should not, understand that some rational explanation lies lurking in the background." I think Wolfe put together a really good story that I'm amazed hangs together so well. I want to look close and see how it's put together.

Speaking of which, Severian's relationship with women has always been the most devilishly confounding to me. Joturna, Valeria, Apheta, The House of Azure, Doras, Katherine, the Witches, even Jolenta. Who are these people to Severian? What is the significance of what happens between him and them? Answer those questions (I've always felt) and you'll understand what the heck is going on in this story.

Of course, rather than vainly trying to figure this out, you could do something valuable like make up your own answers to these questions.

-Ouroboros

Jim Jordan — 23 Nov 1999, 16:40 · follows Ouroboros

At 11:18 AM 11/23/99 -0500, you wrote:

Mind you, it IS pretty ambiguous--if I'm not mistaken, Nutria, who isn't coming from all -that- far away from my POV on things, at first thought the whole thing was about a Gnostic & self-devouring world and that Severian was meant as a grim parody of Christ. Correct me if I'm wrong.

You're right. That's exactly how I took it.

Nutricious Nutria

Ori Kowarsky — 23 Nov 1999, 23:41 · follows Jim Jordan

Alex David Groce wrote:

But Ori, as I pointed out, I read BOTNS when I didn't know anything about Wolfe (other than, from having stumbled across "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" novella in an anthology, that he could write like nobody's business) and I came to an interpretation that's pretty much what Wolfe & us conspirators claim is the "official version." Am I just naive? Or did I come to BOTNS with a different metaphysics, and so reach what is the natural, textual interpretation for anyone of that metaphysics (and, apparently, some other people--I know

several atheists who agree with my general view of what BOTNS is about, they just think Wolfe's created world is a lot less like ours than I think it is). It's your claim that anyone reading BOTNS in an "unbiased" fashion will come to see things your way that I disagree with so strongly.

Alex,

I'm sorry that you disagree. If TBOTNS is a successful exercise in theodicy for you, why not just point out to me the place in the book where the most powerful argument justifying the ways of God to man is made? Then everyone can simply judge for him/her self.

Ori

Ori Kowarsky — 24 Nov 1999, 21:54 · follows Ori Kowarsky

Alex David Groce wrote:

Ori, the best argument "justifying the ways of God to man" in BOTNS is not a quick quotation I can pluck out--although Severian, whose meditations I do not ignore while reading the book, says some pithy stuff. This strike me as the Dave Barry version of THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV: "Dear reader, is there a God? -Fyodor" Gene Wolfe wrote 5 books, not a brief essay solving the problem of evil. Wolfe's a great writer, but he hardly managed to "justify the ways of God to man" in 100 words or less (or even in the whole thing--conclusive arguments are generally not the work of fiction). Where in BOTNS does it say "Don't make no theological interpretations of all this, folks?"

In other words, you have no proof.

I am genuinely disappointed, Alex, as I was hoping you'd come up with something imaginative or at the very least interesting to buttress your point of view. If you are unwilling or unable to support your opinion with any actual evidence from the book then all you are doing is making bald assertions of fact where the facts are absent. It's a great thing to have certain beliefs about TBOTNS, but if you cannot back up these beliefs then these discussions quickly start generating more heat than light.

Ori

Alex David Groce — 25 Nov 1999, 11:47 · follows Ori Kowarsky

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Ori

OK. I will agree that this thread has degenerated to that point (as it did last time), but I've got to elaborate on what I said above. First of all, my evidence would consist of just about every

passage where Severian starts talking about the Increate--are these simply window-dressing? But in general, these don't PROVE anything, any more than your Chapter 34 proves anything. I could raise points like "Why refer so explicitly to 'Eschatology and Genesis' in the text unless we're to connect these events to non-secular eschatology and genesis?" But this also fails as a proof, and even fails to capture what I think Wolfe is getting at. I'm serious when I say you have to read the whole thing--trying to explain how a car works by showing someone just the wheel or the cigarette lighter or the fan belt is unwise--and novels are generally more complex than cars, if they're well done. I doubt that by selective quoting I can prove what I'm saying to you any more than you've proven what you're saying to me--I DO grant that your interpretation can be reached, if you bring certain assumptions to BOTNS, but you seem to still refuse to grant that I can hold my point of view in good faith, which, considering it's THE AUTHOR'S POINT OF VIEW, makes no sense to me.

Much more interesting is the talk going on about whether the person in the street would have been happy about the New Sun if they'd understood it. My guess is a few would have been, most would not. This ties in with the original Messiah's arrival quite nicely--everyone was expecting a secular Messiah who, though annointed by God, would establish a Jewish Kingdom and throw out the Roman bums. Severian, of course, IS a secular Messiah--what he's doing may be instrumental in saving men's souls (and Jesus, who had other things to do, seems to have been being both literal and figurative when he said "Feed my sheep"--God isn't completely unaware that people need food and shelter and a sun that works) but it's primarily material. Unfortunately for those who have been waiting for the New Sun, its benefit will not come to all of them (though I'm unconvinced the death is as widespread as some seem to think--Severian hasn't found the only island of humans). I really think some people would be willing to die to bring better days, but most would not. It is a genuinely awful choice, but Ragnarok really is worse than the floods. That Erebus and Abaia oppose the New Sun seems the ultimate proof of its desirability--I might believe the Yesod crowd is lying, but I have trouble believing Erebus and Abaia have anything but ill will at heart--if Abaia made the Ascians what they are, then if Abaia's against it there must be something to be said for it.

Hmm... This also makes Dr. Talos perhaps the weirdest semi-John the Baptist figure in literature.

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

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Alex David Groce (adgroce at eos.ncsu.edu)

<http://www4.ncsu.edu/~adgroce>

Kieran Cleary — 29 Nov 1999, 12:21 · follows Alex David Groce

Carefully plucking the avern....

Alex David Groce wrote:

but Ragnarok really is worse than the floods<<

IS it? According to Ash, the majority of humans are eventually airlifted to safety by friendly cacogens. Creeping winter is a little more prosaic as an end-of-days scenario, but avoids gigadeath.

The only people (hypothetically) complaining about Ragnarok are the hieros. The hieros are just teleologically ensuring their own survival, attempting to make the snake bite its tail. They don't even know if the humanity of Urth are the ones who will eventually become themselves, but are willing to drown most of them on the off-chance. With scruples like that, who wants to be semi-divine?

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