

# Ziggurat spoilers, or "The good company you keep"

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 21 Jan 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 21 Jan 2000, 13:25

IIRC, it was none other than luminary Michael Swanwick, whose reading of "The Ziggurat" included a significant nod to the sense of incest at the end . . .

## SPOILERS TO FOLLOW

I have no hardcopy of the online discussion, so if anybody wants to follow up on this you will have to talk to Swanwick by correspondence or at a convention.

Point one: Where does Gene Wolfe's sympathy lie in the story? Swanwick says to use the standard "find the wolf" trick. The wolf in this story is the coyote. Who killed the coyote? Emory did.

Point b: Who killed the son? Emory did.

Question Marquess: Why does the final scene seem like incest? Because it is incest--the "alien" is one of his daughters. The allegations of incest for the divorce were probably a lie, but as is so often the case in Wolfe fiction, the lie has a terrible way of coming true in the end.

All together, iirc, this paints a feral picture of Emory: destroying his better self the coyote, killing the rival his son, and marrying his own daughter to "start over, doing it right this time." Not unlike Baldanders, in cutting himself off from the outside world (and/or God) in order to pursue megalomania; or the pirate scientist of 5HC; but in detail more like several heroic Greek horrors all at once.

Granted, some may have a knee-jerk rejection of this reading on the grounds that it applies the (flawed) "mass murderer" reading of PEACE to a different Wolfe story. But before you reject it too quickly, think again on Swanwick, who is wise among Wolfe fans. (I really wish he would write some essays on Wolfe.)

=mantis=

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Alex David Groce — 21 Jan 2000, 17:07 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Hmmm... Yeah, I caught the Tamar reference--I hadn't thought of the daughter-of-the-future possibility--but this is a clone of a step-daughter if so, which IMO makes Emory considerably less responsible for incest than, say, Severian. I simply don't think the story presents things so as to suggest that the incest (with the daughters) is real.

Yes, Emory kills the coyote--but acknowledges his own guilt, if you look closely. Certainly he's a <vastly> more ambiguously bad figure than Baldanders (not that Wolfe doesn't give even Baldanders his devil's due).

It seems to me that Emory IS quite Weer-ish: they share a kind of curiosity that can lead them

into error/disaster, yet also seems to serve as a redeeming element (consider a Weer who DIDN'T hunt for the treasure with Lois, or an Emory who said "hell, I'm not going back to my cabin with those crazies, let's find a motel, son"). Both have a kind of wisdom that they often seem unable to apply to themselves (note Weer's comment re: testifying about the abuse to the "good twin"--his reference here to God makes me have trouble seeing Emory as a cut-off-from-creation figure like Baldanders). Emory's certainly flawed, and his curiosity gets his son murdered, but he also seems to me to have a considerable amount of author sympathy (in this sense I disagree with Gardner Dozois' comments in the intro to whichever Year's Best SF he didn't print "The Ziggurat" in as well as with Swanwick--Wolfe hardly ever portrays a protagonist without massive, potentially deadly, flaws--but Emory has as much underlying author sympathy with him as, say, Number 5 or Weer, I think). In fact, I think one thing this story does is set up a situation where it seems to be a possibility of a "lone man defending his cabin against invaders" and then turns it inside-out--neither the man nor the invaders are purely evil or wrong--both are trapped by misunderstanding and human nature--but the end indicates that even in these circumstances, after blood and pain, there may be a possibility for something else, even if that's ambiguous, too.

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

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