

Ziggurat confusion

The Urth list — 9 messages, 4 voices, 24 Jan 2000

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Alice Turner — 24 Jan 2000, 17:38

Mantis and Alex, please help out a confused citizen. (Yes, there are spoilers, but I'm not going to leave any space.)

mantis:

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.

How do we know that, and why would he do such a thing?

Point b: Who killed the son? Emory did.

How do we know that, and ditto?

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.

But this is dreadful. It means that he also shot his wife and other daughter, and that there were no alien women at all, and that the gun and the ax were never stolen. How do you know this? I would certainly not have guessed this.

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.

It seems too melodramatic to me; why do you (or Swanwick) reject the science-fictional story in favor of a homicidal maniac interpretation?

Now Alex:

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.

Me neither. Besides, Tamar was a daughter-in-law, and it was her own idea. Though I suppose pun could be intended.

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).

Does he admit it? Where...and why? He *likes* the coyote.

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.

Gosh, this is certainly the way I read it too. I mean, look at those details of making the bunk bed for Jan, of planning how the girls can sleep, of the "girls" and "boys" demarcations, they don't seem like the set-up for a bloodbath, and I completely believed in his fatherly feeling for the girls. Falsely accusing a man of inappropriate behavior is one of the deadliest and most unfair weapons a woman can aim; it's what made Sue Miller's THE GOOD MOTHER such a frightening work of realism. I didn't even think he killed the coyote, and I still don't get that. Can someone help me out?

-alga

Alex David Groce — 24 Jan 2000, 17:57 · follows Alice Turner

Ah, we're all using a very loose interpretation of "kill" (at least I am, and assume Swanwick, mantis are doing the same) here. Emory's LOVE for the coyote, trying to tame it, slowly luring it closer to his house, overrides it's fundamental aversion to man-smell. It comes to trust people. Thus, it dies. Emory is an indirect agent, but feels responsible (read closely the part where he finds the body). I think a similar accusation can be made for his son's death--he causes his son to return to a danger that kills him, but it's not a murder.

As far as I'm aware, John Kessel (in private conversation, I don't think he's written about this anywhere, although maybe I'm wrong) is the only person I know who suspects that Emory is delusional and sets up the massacre that you (and I) find incompatible with the rest of the implications. As I understand it, Swanwick & mantis are going with an SF approach, but take a negative view of Emory's actions that I don't.

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

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Alex David Groce — 24 Jan 2000, 18:39 · follows Alex David Groce

In fact, thinking about this--doesn't Severian? Horn? Silk? someone somewhere say "we all destroy what we love best." THIS is the sense in which Emory kills the coyote and his son--a strong analogy, in my mind, to the ways Severian and Dorcas truly torture each other--with, I think, love as the root of the pain.

BLUE seems to deal with this in a central way, as well. I think I've said before that Wolfe seems to have a strong similarity with Dante's exploration in *The Divine Comedy* (adopted from St. Thomas, of course)--that only where there is love can there be real moral pain or evil--at the root of the worst things lies a perversion or erroneous hierarchy of loves--for Dante, and, I suspect Wolfe, a hierarchy that mistakes some lesser object for God and inverts the ladder of love into a parodic downward spiral. Thus the insistence that although Abaia/Erebus etc. can thwart the Increate to the extent that they violate, presumably, the inherent good of their own natures, they cannot fail to serve also as unwilling and angry agents of Providence--another theme in the philosophies I'm guessing Wolfe is most comfortable with (anyway, the ones Chesterton's POV is based upon*).

* for a (very Christian-biased, of course) treatment of the parts of Aquinas/ Augustine/Anselm/Aristotle and other "A"-list philosophers who seem to have an influence on Wolfe, I suggest Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, especially as Wolfe doesn't claim to have read them all in the original Latin/Greek or anything.

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Jim Jordan — 25 Jan 2000, 12:11 · follows Alex David Groce

I'm with Alga on this one. The interpretation she rejects seems completely wrong to me, along with the notion that Weer is a mass murderer. I submit that, since Wolfe has explicitly denied the latter notion, those who read such stories this way are "overreading" and should drop back and read again. I don't deny that Wolfe invites such overreading, but when (a) other readers see it differently and (b) those other readers are confirmed by Wolfe, then re-reading seems to be in order.

In case anyone does not get Alga's reference to Tamar, you can read it in Genesis 38. However, David's actual daughter was also named Tamar, so "incest" of some sort might be a possibility. The description of Ziggurat's Tamar as being from an eastern country would fit either, but fits the earlier Tamar better, since Emory is an American. If Wolfe had written that his Tamar was an American, then the allusion would be to the daughter of David; she would be of the same race as Emory, so "incest" would be a possibility. Since she is an outsider, from far away, the allusion is to the daughter in law of Jacob, whose father was a Canaanite.

If you want to allegorize this story, and I'm not sure of this at all, consider the New Testament notion that the kingdom is being taken from the unworthy bride (the Jews) and being given to others (the Gentiles) -- a point made often in the Old Testament as well. (Gee, now I've got to reread the story myself and see if this works at all....) But before closing, remember that Luke 4 and other passages refer to various gentile women who were brought into Israel as "worthy gentile brides" and as signs that Israel was (at these times) judged unworthy because of (spiritual) harlotry. (Examples: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the widow helped by Elijah).

Nutria

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Jim Jordan — 28 Jan 2000, 10:49 · follows Jim Jordan

Just finished rereading Ziggurat, and some comments on the mooted "evil Emory" interpretation.

At 12:11 PM 1/25/00 -0600, I wrote:

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Wrong, Jim. Tamar is not her name, but the name Emory gives her, and he explicitly calls the name that of Solomon's sister. Now, Wolfe-like, that can also allude to Tamar's rape by her brother, and also to the earlier Tamar, but first we have to deal with what is explicit. When she sees the lion on Emory's pen, she hums "God Save the Queen." The lion is the Lion of Judah, symbol of the tribe of Judah and of the Davidic royal house. In an all-woman society, the king is a queen of course, but the allusion is to Solomon. (Also to Jesus.) With this in mind, I want to see any hint of evidence that Amnon's rape of sister Tamar is in view, or the earlier Tamar's seduction of her father-in-law Judah.

As to who killed the coyote: Emory says that he was responsible for the beast's death ONLY in

the sense that he had tamed it, and thus it was not prepared when it came against a human interested in killing it. I see no hint that Emory himself killed it.

As to who killed Brook, the son: Where is there any hint that Emory did this? True, by going back to the cabin, he might be seen as somehow responsible, in a way analogous to the death of the coyote. But he was asleep at the time the boy was killed. Where is there any hint of anything more?

As for how "bad" it was to return to the cabin; well, remember that this man is an engineer (Wolfe?) who has lost his business, and now sees the possibility of getting hold of technology that will enable him to recover his life. He's starting to live again, after only wanting to die.

(Where's the Wolfe? Emory is the Wolfe. He is the kind of person Wolfe is or wants to be. Emory's comments to his daughter about God and lying are pure Wolfe. I'll bet Emory's hostility to television is also Wolfe's opinion.)

Now, if this story were written in the first person, say as a deposition before a judge trying Emory for murder, we would be invited to consider that the narrative is a succession of self-serving lies and distortions. But that's not how the story is written. It is in the limited third person. The narrator is Wolfe. I find no hint that Emory is evil, or insane, or self-deceived. True, he's flawed. He shackled up with Jan before marrying her, and that is not Wolfe's value system. Emory admits to Brook that his motivation for getting involved with Jan was selfish. But that's a "little" sin, committed by a man who gives very good advice to his stepdaughter about lying, a man who knows better, and is suffering for it.

As for the women on the timeship being clones of Emory's women: Where is there any hint of this? It involves a LOT of reading "behind the lines" to come to this conclusion; to wit, that eggs were taken from the girl and used to make clones that have come back in time. But in fact, the story continually says that these Brownies are OFTEN coming back in time and messing with people. Stealing eggs? Maybe. Stealing children? Well, that is indeed mentioned. So perhaps the hypothesis is not completely amiss. But where is the evidence that Tamar is herself a clone of the girl? (I cannot remember which girl it is, so I cannot give the name here; my book is at home.)

Moreover, the intermediate color of the skin of the three future women leads me against this hypothesis. They look like what you think of when you think of a future wherein all the various races of earth have melded into one. The daughters are American white girls. A clone of one of them should look like that, not be brownish. Yet all the future women are brownish; hence "brownies." How can they be clones of various white, black, and yellow women of the past?

I'm happy to be set straight on this, but for now I don't see it. The end does not "feel like incest" to me. I don't know how you get that from the text.

As I see it, at the psychological level, we have a man twice wounded by adult women, and now wounded again by female children. He wants to die.

He's definitely estranged from women, as his comments, however judiciously phrased, indicate. Then we have the three women, who are definitely fearful and estranged from men. At the end, this man and one of the women come together, overcoming their fear and estrangement. That, it seems to me, is what the story is "about."

It's also about a man gradually recovering from two horrible losses (his business and his marriage). First he plans to kill himself. Then he begins to see a possibility of forming another business. He also tames the coyote, a "preliminary love" that is a stage toward his "taming" of "Tamar." (I think the name is important in this connection.) Thus, the story is "about" recovering from loss and finding a new life.

I also wrote:

If you want to allegorize this story, and I'm not sure of this at all, consider the New Testament notion that the kingdom is being taken from the unworthy bride (the Jews) and being given to others (the Gentiles) -- a point made often in the Old Testament as well. (Gee, now I've got to reread

the story myself and see if this works at all....) But before closing, remember that Luke 4 and other passages refer to various gentile women who were brought into Israel as "worthy gentile brides" and as signs that Israel was (at these times) judged unworthy because of (spiritual) harlotry. (Examples: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the widow helped by Elijah).

Naw, Jim; this does not work. I cannot see enough to make this work. Apologies for tossing this spanner into the works.

It IS, however, interesting that the timeship is called a Ziggurat, and there are also the references back to the Tower of Babel. Consider that at that Tower (Genesis 11) we have a confusion of tongues, after which people are estranged and can no longer work together. That does seem to be a theme in the story. The women speak a different language, that may or may not be future English. There is also the estrangement between men and women that is the major theme of the story. That estrangement is overcome by love, surprisingly and unexpectedly. Thus, the Ziggurat is destroyed in the end. Babel defeated.

Nutria

Alex David Groce — 28 Jan 2000, 12:47 · follows Jim Jordan

<snipping Nutria's nice analysis>

One thing--I think the twins are not necessarily "American white girls"-- isn't their father, the tennis player, Mediterranean? My copy is at home so I can't confirm this, but it's definitely the impression I got. This is the best point in favor of the "twin clone in the future" idea--which I'm still not sure is intended.

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Jim Jordan — 28 Jan 2000, 12:41 · follows Alex David Groce

At 12:47 PM 1/28/00 -0500, you wrote:
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I didn't pick up any reference to Mediterranean, but perhaps someone else did.

Nutricious

mark millman — 28 Jan 2000, 14:14 · follows Jim Jordan

I can't believe that the women from the future are clones of the captured twin; for one thing, the women are the same height as a pair of eleven-year-old girls. For another, the twins are described as having dark hair, but no mention of their skin tone is ever made, as far as I can recall (I don't have a copy of the story with me either). This suggests that they're not particularly swarthy, at least as compared to Emory, Jan,

and Brook. The women are noticeably dark, but not so much so that in Africa they wouldn't seem noticeably light-skinned. I think that if Wolfe had wanted to suggest that the women are direct descendants of the twin, he'd have given another (maybe only one more, but at least that one) clue. The facts that the twins and the women are the same size; that the twins' father is Mediterranean and Emory gives Tamar a Hebrew name; that the name Tamar is associated with an incestuous episode; and that Emory's relationship with Tamar must, to some degree, be a paternal one at least in the sense of providing education, protection, and the necessities of life (as Tamar is unfamiliar with the culture, doesn't speak the language, and is wounded to boot) all create an atmosphere in which the implication that the relationship between Emory and Tamar is somehow incestuous naturally arises; but this doesn't have to mean that there is any literal sort of incest occurring, and in fact, I don't think that there is.

Mark Millman

At 12:47 PM 28-01-00 -0500, Alex David Groce
<Alex_Groce at gs246.sp.cs.cmu.edu> wrote:
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Alice Turner — 29 Jan 2000, 10:45 · follows mark millman

I find myself totally in agreement with the Rat, the new Reformed Rat, His Nutriciousness, who went back to contradict himself on "The Ziggurat." (Quote not included as it is quite long, but it contradicts the Swanwick theory proposed by mantis and also establishes that it's Tamar #2, not #1 who is referred to--I had actually forgotten that there was a #2, so thanks). Hey, if we can do it, maybe there's hope for the citizens of Blue.

-alga