

the Ziggurat

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 28 Jan 2000

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Robert Borski — 28 Jan 2000, 16:33

My two centavos worth on "The Ziggurat" controversy, most of which plays off of Nutria's rather interesting interpretation.

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.

I think that for all intents and purposes that Tamar is her name--at least it's the only one Wolfe provides via Emery, his viewpoint character. To therefore ignore the connotations of both incest and sexual assault associated with that name may be shortsighted.

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.

Two alternate points here. The lion emblem identifies where Emery picked up the pen he's using--the Red Lion Inn--and in alchemy, the red lion refers to the philosopher's stone--the technical version of which Emery brings back from the ziggurat. At least Emery hopes the magic dish will help him wrest gold from his tragedy.

As for "God save the Queen," I thought this was possibly meant to function as a nod to the most famous vanished historical community of North America--the colony at Roanoke Island, and whose first firstborn child, Virginia Dare (named after Elizabeth Regina), disappeared along with everybody else, just like the frontier settlement Brook mentions on p. 309. (See the movie: "Croatoan: the Brownie's Revenge.")

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.

Again, I believe you're being too literal here. No, indeed, Emery does not literally kill the coyote, but he sure does so figuratively, by encouraging/bribing it to disregard its natural fear of man. Wolfe uses this idea of "safe distance" a number of times in the story. "Come here," Emery shouts, when he first sees one of the alien women. Later, when she and her partner breach that distance, it leads to their demise. Also note how Emery repeats several times, "Boys here, girls over there." Given the charges of incest leveled against him, this seems the safest and most practical thing to observe, yet look at how in the very last sentence, "Very gently, [Tamar's] fingers closed over his." Once again, distance has been closed and it will lead to dire consequences.

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?

The women and the twins appear very similar physically. To wit: "What had they thought of Jan, a woman almost a foot taller than they? Jan with her creamy complexion and yellow hair? Of Aileen and Alayna, _girls of their own size, nearly as dark as they_, and like as two peas?" (p. 318) Also, in talking about the chimney descent, Emery comments: "He could not have done it, and neither could Brook, if Brook were still alive, but the twins could have done it, and these women were scarcely larger." (339) The twins, being eleven, could well be near their full height. And why, if not to match up skin colors of twins and aliens, would Wolfe have their father be dark-complected, when, any other color if he were not attempting a parallel, would be perfectly fine, if not expected?

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.

One last note in this respect: Alayna is the twin who tells Emery she has refused to lie about his having molested her. But we never hear what Aileen has to say in this regard; and it's Aileen that both has the doctor's appointment Jan mentions (shrink? gynecologist?) and who winds up kidnapped by the aliens. 'Aileen,' however, and 'alien' are formed from the exact same letters. Surely, this is not a coincidence, but Wolfe tipping his hat as to the origin of Tamar, the once and future daughter of pedophile Emery Bainbridge.

Robert Borski

Jim Jordan — 28 Jan 2000, 21:03 · follows Robert Borski

One other thing:

There are a number of Wolfe stories wherein the last paragraph or line stuns the reader into realizing he's misunderstood what has been going on, and forces a re-read. But that does not happen here. If the last lines read, "She looked so much like one of the twins. Emory could not wait to have his way with her!" Then we'd be entitled to think, "Hey! Whoa! What's going on here?" But nothing like that happens. The ending is gentle and kind on the face of it, and I don't see any indication there, or elsewhere, that "nothing is what it seems."

Nutria

Jim Jordan — 28 Jan 2000, 20:52 · follows Jim Jordan

Wow, Borski. You make an interesting case. I guess it just does not make sense to me, without something a lot more explicit. From what I can tell, your interpretation assumes the "maximum delusion" view that Mantis set out for me/us. Maybe not, but if not, I see even more problems. I'll try to explain:

First a bit of response to Mantis. I do think Emory is partially modeled on Wolfe. That does not mean he is a "good Wolfe." The family of clones in

Fifth Head aren't "good Wolfes" either. So, even on the "max del" reading, Emory would still be a Wolfe, just a bad one. On a conventional SF reading, which I still think is right, he's just a flawed Wolfe, like Wolfe himself.

Now, to interact with interaction:

At 04:33 PM 1/28/00 -0600, RB wrote:

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Maybe, and that's a point possibly in your favor. I still can't buy it, but more on that below. I guess on your take "Solomon" is Emory, so that the relationship is hinted at as incestuous. But that's really a stretch, without better indications of the overall presuppositions of your reading.

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Well, I'm happy to grant this, and you may be right that these two are all there is. It is surely Wolfean to have multiple allusions, so I'll keep my suggestion in the mix for the nonce.

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.

Again, I believe you're being too literal here. No, indeed, Emory does not literally kill the coyote, but he sure does so figuratively, by encouraging/bribing it to disregard its natural fear of man. Wolfe uses this idea of "safe distance" a number of times in the story. "Come here," Emory shouts, when he first sees one of the alien women. Later, when she and her partner breach that distance, it leads to their demise. Also note how Emory repeats several times, "Boys here, girls over there." Given the charges of incest leveled against him, this seems the safest and most practical thing to observe, yet look at how in the very last sentence, "Very gently, [Tamar's] fingers closed over his." Once again, distance has been closed and it will lead to dire consequences.

My reading also takes the distances into account, but as being closed through healing, not in horror.

Now, I'm assuming that your reading (or the Max Del reading) goes like this: When Jan threatens to take Emory to court, he (subconsciously?) decides to kill her and the twin who does not ask forgiveness.

But what does this entail? Well, if the future women are really just the three women in his family, I can see that the shouting woman on the videoscreen (?) would be Jan, and then he kills one of them in a fight. But then, what is the stuff about driving them to town? On the max delusion reading, how do we sort out what happens, even maniacally, and what does not? At this point, it makes more sense to me that the three future women are real brownies, and that their threeness is a literary link to the three women already in Emory's life. One is larger. They threaten him. One shouts at him. Etc. But for me this does not indicate that they are the same identical persons, one set in real life and one set in a maniacal delusion. They are just parallel.

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But the third alien is also brown, right? And Jan is not. This seems to me to establish only a parallel, not an identity. (And I have found that their father had "swarthy good looks," so that is indeed established for me now.) Sure, the twins are "matched up" with the future women, but why does that indicate that they are the same, or clones? It is just another parallel, I submit.

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.

One last note in this respect: Alayna is the twin who tells Emory she has refused to lie about his having molested her. But we never hear what Aileen has to say in this regard; and it's Aileen that both has the doctor's appointment Jan mentions (shrink? gynecologist?) and who winds up kidnapped by the aliens. 'Aileen,' however, and 'alien' are formed from the exact same letters. Surely, this is not a coincidence, but Wolfe tipping his hat as to the origin of Tamar, the once and future daughter of pedophile Emory Bainbridge.

On my reading, Emory is guilty only of "rocking and kissing" them. That might be a double-entendre, but is not evidence of anything other than affection. Now, Jan may herself believe, or have convinced herself, that Emory molested them. But why agree with her? She may be a somewhat decent woman, and there is indication of this. But she appears to be making a stereotyped charge (as Alga noted), which she may or may not have convinced herself of.

As for the Aileen/Alien parallel: well, I can see it, but what does it mean? It seems to me no more than another allusion to the distance that has come between Emory and women in general. Women are alien.

I'm trying to get into the Max Del reading. Okay, why does Emory kill Brook? Because he thinks his son might have a TV in the car, and he hates TV? What is the visit to the Ziggurat? A visit to the hotel to murder Jan and the girls? Pure imagination? Can a visit to a hotel/motel be "seen" by a maniac in the way Emory perceives his visit to the Ziggurat? I cannot see how.

I have to say that as I reskim parts of the novella, I can see why one might read it this way, but only if one comes to the narrative with a lot of suspicion. I still see lots of problems. The future women appear before Jan and the kids arrive, and a burn appears on the back of a chair on the porch. Is this also imagination on Emory's part? How do we account for that? And, to repeat Alga's question, who stole the axe and rifle, or was this only a maniacal delusion also?

Emory thinks one of the differences between men and women is that women have a fairy-tale view of love. So on the Max Del reading, it is actually Emory who has moved into a fairy (brownie) tale. Would that be the view? My take is that men and women are not so different as Emory supposes, and that this is actually part of Wolfe's point.

Now, maybe you're not taking the Max Del view, but then what? We've got real future women. So who murders Brook? What evidence is there that Emory killed him? His mooted lack of emotion could be because he's stunned. He actually prays to God that it not be so. He does not look all that unemotional to me; just stunned. That part of the story seems quite

right and realistic to me. It could be Maximum Delusion, I guess, but it seems far better to read it as real. If the future women killed Brook, then they, not Emory, are the authors of the violence in the story.

And on a "real SF" reading, then we're back to Emory's driving Jan and the girls to safety. Not an indication of a bad person. And EVEN IF Tamar is somehow supposed to be a clone, she is only the clone of a stepdaughter, and so marrying her is not incest.

I remain very unconvinced of this reading. I think it's too clever by half. But with Wolfe, you never know (unless he tells you), so write back and take me to pieces if you can!

Nutria

Nicholas Gevers — 30 Jan 2000, 21:39 · follows Jim Jordan

Entering the very intriguing debate on "The Ziggurat": after having read the novella inconclusively back in 1996, I reread it in the context of STRANGE TRAVELERS, partly because I was preparing to review the collection and was interested in seeing it as an anthology unified by theme. The conclusion I came to was similar to the one I reached some time ago about LONG SUN (see my article "Five Steps Towards Briah" in NOVA EXPRESS): that is, that ST as a whole is about the horrors of the present world and about generally vain attempts to escape or palliate them. The stories in ST were written in a defined period; they have a common tone; in this context, then, "The Ziggurat" is one experiment of several in delineating how a character can be led astray by hubris and the idiosyncrasies of his own psyche, avoiding moral and religious truth in favour of solipsism and fantasy.

Jim Jordan — 31 Jan 2000, 12:30 · follows Nicholas Gevers

At 09:39 PM 1/30/00 -0800, NG wrote:

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Interesting take. I'm intrigued. Please elaborate on how you take the overall narrative. I'm interested in your interaction with the specifics, especially a critique of my very positive take on the story. It does not appear to me that Emory "avoids" religious truth at all. (And I hope you won't tell us to wait for your printed review! How long would we have to wait?)
BTW, loved your review of the Silk quartet.

Nutria