

Ziggurat--several readings, including my own

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 30 Jan 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 30 Jan 2000, 11:48

SPOILER WARNINGS (I guess)

Speaking of guesses, I guess a lot of the various readings have to do with two key elements:

1) How Emory is perceived by reader (as basically heroic; as basically villainous; as mouthpiece for Wolfe; etc.)

2) How the ending is perceived (as basically happy; as basically creepy; as basically tragic)

So the "Cry Sexist" crowd, including but not limited to Dozois (tip of the hat to Alex David Groce for reminding us of that factoid), and Ken Houghton, and others: it seems they see it as "mouthpiece" and "happy for the John Normanoids, including Gene Wolfe, but tragic for the more enlightened."

I will call this thing they decry the "Cave-man-ifesto." Since in the end it looks like "Me strong Tarzan, you weak slave" stuff. The Cavemaniesto meets a certain crude political position that cannibalism, insanity, and incest cannot: one can reasonably say, "There are people like that, people who propose or dream of that as a eutopia." Then there is the assigning of Wolfe to that category of people, because if the ending is "happy," then Wolfe must be agreeing to it; if it is a "tragic" ending, then it is a bit harder (but of course nothing is impossible <g>).

One of the twirling tigers actually compared "The Ziggurat" to Heinlein's (controversial) FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD. This seemed out of the blue for a long while to me (and I had already read FF years before), but in trying to puzzle it out, I formulated the Cavemaniesto mentioned above. (For those not familiar with FF, for our purposes it is basically about a Competant Man (tm) who is shunted to another dimension along with family and friends; in the strange new world they find themselves in, social mores and conventions no longer hold--the wife/mother leaves with the teenage son to form their own micro-society, the Competant Man mates with the college girl, and everything for Competant Man works out in the end as a cross between Biblical Patriarchism and Frontier Life in the Old West. Unambiguous happy ending: new young bride, new babies, hearth, home, and rifle.)

(These elements were not what make FF controversial, I don't think--FF is inflammatory for racial issues.)

I don't mean to make any of these readings sound monolithic; I don't think they were. And as is often the case, as more details emerged, there was more divergence of opinion even among those who had been on the same "side." But the tigers seemed founded upon a bedrock of "Cry Sexist."

On to my own reading.

As I've said before, it was and remains largely unformed. I didn't notice anything about the wife, so I guess that brands me right there; but there were other little details that seemed so strange--so dreamy, or surreal, or partaking of dream-logic. Yet still on the edge of realism. And that an engineer was having this frankly science fictional experience (rather like an ERB novel) added to the sense of a dream being dreamed by Emory (sf being the dreamstuff of engineers).

FWIW, I thought that Emory's reaction to his son's death was acceptable--that wasn't one of the surreal bits for me. (I don't know if I voiced this disagreement at the time or only thought of muddying the waters. It did really bug me for a while, but I also wanted to see where things were going before I derailed it.)

I didn't read the ending as happy. I thought it was chilling; and I thought that Wolfe had not intended a happy ending (that is: I didn't think I was reading between the lines, seeing something Wolfe had not intended, like a consequence he was not aware of, etc. Such is usually the hubris of any reader, whether said reader thinks she is reading what the author wrote or what the author let slip). I saw the suggestion of incest, but didn't follow it very far; I saw the child-bride of Tarzan thing, and that was spooky, but I didn't follow it back to "A Solar Labyrinth." I didn't make the leap to "Dial Em-4-Murderer," but the creepiness, the spookiness, the weird confusion/association of daughters and aliens, all that was groundwork preparing my mind for the notion. I thought of it as being like CASTLEVIEW, but with "A Cabin on the Coast" (certainties of UFO-fairies) removed, crossed with PEACE: a rebus?

(CASTLEVIEW ends [and begins?] with a mock-combat human sacrifice that seems necessary for the seasons to change. I read this as creepy, not as something that Wolfe thinks should be imitated in the real world; but truly something that was done long ago for countless chiliads.)

So when "Max Del" came along it fit with some of my pre-existing notions, another tool for looking at the text as not-entirely-realistic. Like any "pure" form, its single set solution is its largest weakness. I don't recall how the artifact in the lake was interpreted by "Max Del" theory (downed dirigible?); I don't know that it came up.

I remember the other readings because they were all so much more developed than my own. Even more than the usual case: I'm just the messenger.

Maybe the inclusion of insanity, pedophilia, and quasi-incest into the mix took some of the wind from the "Cry Sexist" group, since these things are all strong taboos which cannot have political standings today, thus making it trickier to pin the tale on the Wolfe. It is much more likely that things quieted down because the majority of the tigers had just moved on to other things (but whoever wrote that "Publisher's Weekly" review is clearly a member in fact or by inclination).

=mantis=

Alex David Groce — 30 Jan 2000, 16:09 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

So the "Cry Sexist" crowd, including but not limited to Dozois (tip of the hat to Alex David Groce for reminding us of that factoid), and Ken Houghton, and others: it seems they see it as "mouthpiece" and "happy for the John Normanoids, including Gene Wolfe, but tragic for the more enlightened."

Thanks, but oops--I may have slandered Dozois if that's how it came across-- unless he's spoken in another forum, I'm referring to his comments in the intro. to whatever Year's Best SF "The Ziggurat" _should_ have appeared in. :) Dozois just says (in a nutshell) "_Great_ story, as far as the prose goes-- controversial, a lot of people think Wolfe is a sexist asshole for writing this--I'm

not so sure--I didn't like the protagonist, and I don't know if Wolfe wanted me too. That Wolfe, he's a tricky one." Which is all in agreement with me, except I'm _fairly_ sure Wolfe wasn't setting Emory up as a straw man--nor as a paragon, of course. In fact, my guess is Dozois didn't stick in in Year's Best that year (given it's the ONLY short story he mentions by name and at any length in the Introduction) because of length issues (I could name some candidates for him to have dropped, but...)

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

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Jim Jordan — 30 Jan 2000, 17:00 · follows Alex David Groce

At 04:09 PM 1/30/00 -0500, you wrote:

Dozois just says (in a nutshell) "_Great_ story, as far as the prose goes-- controversial, a lot of people think Wolfe is a sexist asshole for writing this--I'm not so sure--I didn't like the protagonist, and I don't know if Wolfe wanted me too. That Wolfe, he's a tricky one." Which is all in agreement with me, except I'm _fairly_ sure Wolfe wasn't setting Emory up as a straw man--nor as a paragon, of course.

I really think this is a superficial analysis on the part of "a lot of people." If someone so much as hints that men and women might be different in any respect other than sheer plumbing, he is a "sexist asshole"? Well, from such a kneejerk PC position, Wolfe is always going to look like a Neanderthal!

Yes, Emory is alienated from women, to a degree. Not from his little girls though, and there is nothing but fatherly affection in view here. To the extent that his comments reflect that alienation, the point of the story is to show the beginnings of healing. Emory might have just gone ahead and killed the third future woman. Didn't you expect him to? Instead, he reaches out, and she accepts. Why this needs to be interpreted as dire or sinister completely baffles me. In short, to the degree that Emory's understanding of women is imperfect, the novella itself indicates this fact, and shows that Emory is not fully Wolfe. (I mentioned that Emory thinks women look for fairytale love, but it is he who hooks up with a fairy at the end. So Wolfe does NOT share all of Emory's prejudices. Men and women are different, but not as different as Emory has come to think.)

Agreeing with Mantis, then: we don't have to "rescue" Wolfe from being a Neanderthal by reaching for some arcane paradigm. The story itself, read straightforwardly, rescues him.

Nutria