

Re Ziggurat/ John Keats

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 26 Oct 1999

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Allan Lloyd — 26 Oct 1999, 10:35

I just noticed a small reference in the Ziggurat to Keats' poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci" on page 275. Wolfe finishes the paragraph with the words "No bird sang". This is a close quote from the first and last verse of the poem, and the first verse is almost a scene setter for the story

O What can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O What can ail thee knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

The poem goes on to tell how the knight "met a lady in the meads, full beautiful-a faery's child" and rides off with her to her "elfin grot", where, after a night of love he awakes to find himself "on the cold hillside".

Jan does seem to be, in Emery's eyes, a Belle Dame sans Merci (which I always used to read in my schoolboy French as "the beautiful lady that never said thankyou") and Emery sees himself very much as the rejected lover. The cold hillside, the abduction of the children specifically compared to faery abduction in the text, and the tradition of time moving differently in the faery realm all have echoes in the poem. I know the story then goes in different directions, but I think Wolfe was making a conscious reference to Keats.

The other thing I found interesting was that on first reading the story, I was reminded of the general atmosphere of a James Tiptree Jnr story. It's hard to be specific, and would maybe be worth some more study, but Tiptree also named a story with a Keats quote from the same poem ("and I awoke and found myself on the cold hill's side", a story about sex with aliens) and in the previous story in Strange Travelers the child's name is Tiptree (shortened to Tippy). Spooky or what!

Allan