

The Ziggurat: Three readings

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Nicholas Gevers — 06 Feb 2000, 04:38

Here's my more detailed take on "The Ziggurat" (at last).

THE THREE MEANINGS OF "THE ZIGGURAT"

Before analyzing "The Ziggurat" in detail, I'd like to sum up once more the overall analysis I've offered of STRANGE TRAVELERS, and which Jim Jordan had begun to take further before he went away:

STRANGE TRAVELERS is a single work in mosaic form, all of its stories presenting variations on the same theme, their ordering in the book broadly reflecting the progression of Wolfe's argument. That argument is the irretrievable horror of this world, the need to escape that horror through transcendence (escape), and the further need to escape or transcend in the right, i.e. Christian, manner, avoiding hellish and sinful pitfalls that may appear to be tantalizing routes of escape. Unfortunately, the pitfalls are usually the exits opted for (suicide, paganism, solipsism, etc.)

In this context, "The Ziggurat" can be read in three ways, all of which are simultaneously valid. The three readings form a hierarchy, which, to be allusive and flippant, I will frame along the lines of the three levels of meaning in THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER: the practical meaning, the soothsayer's meaning, and the transsubstantial meaning. None of these meanings is to be scanted; they are, once again, all valid. But their importance differs; the second is greater than the first, and the third far outweighs the second. So, taking the meanings in ascending order:

1) THE PRACTICAL MEANING. It may seem presumptuous to equate John Kessel, Michael Swanwick, and others with Dorcas' ploughman; but they have proposed the Maximum Delusion theory, which is the most obvious, and therefore least consequential, hypothesis in play. Emery may be a madman. He may have molested his stepdaughters. He may have dreamed up the ziggurat as a fantastic sublimation of his criminal actions. The

killings of the two time-travelling women may in fact stand for Emery's murders of Jan and Aileen. If Henry James and William Hjortsberg, among many others, can do this sort of thing, why not Wolfe? An SF story becomes a case of maximum delusion. There's easily enough evidence in the text to justify this view, and it has been intensively cited. Upshot of 1): Emery is destined for the electric chair, a life term, or an unpleasant few decades in a mental hospital.

2) THE SOOTHSAYER'S MEANING. This is the reconciliation theory. The war of the sexes is portrayed in mundane and extreme forms, which complement each other closely. Everything that happens, however symbolically resonant, is objectively valid. Thus, the disagreements between Emery and Jan, and the allegations of child abuse, are mirrored in the nature and actions of the time travellers from the ziggurat. Emery is precise, believing in punctuality: the masculine outlook; Jan and the strange women willfully manipulate time, Jan by arriving early to avoid the storm, the strangers by using a time machine. Men and women cannot understand each other, even though they speak the same language (English, in all cases). Jan is divorcing Emery; the time-travellers are divorced from our time on every level of understanding. The twins resemble the time-travellers, and are about to cease to be Emery's children. Etcetera. This is Tiptree territory. But reconciliation beckons: the ziggurat, a Tower of Babel, has fallen; the women-only (monolingual) future that is the ziggurat's time of origin can perhaps be averted. Emery and Tamar, using their own resources, will come to understand each other, and build a new life together. BUT: problems: Emery's relationship with Tamar reeks of abuse; Emery is deluded about his future (after all, Brook's murder has to be accounted for to the sheriff); and he is selfishly destroying the ziggurat, with most of its invaluable technological potential, to cover his tracks. Upshot of 2): Emery is destined for prison, or is a selfish and abusive monster, or both.

3) THE TRANSSUBSTANTIAL MEANING. This is where "The Ziggurat"'s context, STRANGE TRAVELERS, becomes salient. STRANGE TRAVELERS is, as indicated earlier, a religious text, or, to be more precise, a religious anthology. "The Ziggurat" is, like most of the stories in ST, an account of an attempted transcendence that is in reality damnation. Emery has damned himself, as can be seen in his own words to Alayna on page 290, a homily against lying as something that is intensely

harmful to oneself. Having held up this high standard, Emery violates it, lying to the law about a succession of violent deaths, lying to the world by denying it the truth of the ziggurat's existence, lying to himself in the manner of either 1) or 2). Upshot of 3): Emery is damned.

My opinion is that Wolfe intended all of these meanings to be inferable, to be held simultaneously in the reader's mind, a technique he has used many times before. The precise resolution of what is real and what is delusional is unimportant; what matters is that all three readings conduce to the same sense, of Emery taking a decisively wrong turning, onto yet another road to Hell.