

Brothels

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 Apr 2000

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Jim Jordan — 06 Apr 2000, 17:52

<excerpt>At 02:08 PM 3/30/00 +1000, you wrote:

Finally, does Wolfe have a thing about brothels or what? Featured prominently in 5HC and the Long Sun series, and also in TBNS, especially Shadow. Where does this interest come from I wonder? Korean War? Or...

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The brothel is a counterfeit of the Church, the Great Harlot of the Book of Revelation. That's pretty clear in 5HC, where the address is 666 Street of the Counterfeit (Humbug). The line of clones is pretty much the Antichrist, as the chilling last line of the first novella hints, a self-contained humanity trying to achieve transcendence without true interaction with others, without heterogeneity. Harlots are the same: women without true marriages, children, lives -- stuck in sterility and doomed to a sad fate at the end: used up and cast out. Sterility versus heterogeneity seems to be pretty much the theme of the triad of novellas, and is seen later on as the humans try to wipe out the aborigenes, who try to become human (heterogeneously); is seen in the practice of slavery; etc.

In Shadow, I take it that this state-run brothel is like the Harlot of Revelation, who rides on the back of the Beast (state power). Again, a counterfeit of true love, of the Rose of Severian's grave, the Rose for which he searches, and in terms of which search he never makes the mistake of visiting the brothel again. (The symbolism may make more sense when you realize how much a role the sacraments of baptism and communion play in the Severian narrative, both in positive and "counterfeited" forms.) The brothel here is also part of the perversity of the Autarchy, a form of "circuses" maintained to keep the population in line ("Wanna make it with an exultant? Well, here's your chance, buddy!"). Wonder why this world needs to be washed clean in a new flood?

Finally, in Nightside, the counterpoise of brothel and manteion is, shall we say, pregnant with meaning. Again, later on, Silk's love for Hyacinth is Christ's love for His wayward bride. It's all pretty conventional.

So, I don't think we should try to pry into Wolfe's personal life for this. It is very standard Christian symbolism.

JBJordan