

Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 16 Apr 2000

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Michael Straight — 16 Apr 2000, 23:04

I finally got a copy of this book and will probably be posting about some of the stories over the next few days.

Are the quotations in this story from an existing Sci-Fi Pulp, or did Wolfe invent them? They seem exactly like what I know of H.G. Wells's "Island of Doctor Moreau" is about, although I've never read it. I wonder if naming the hero Ransom was a nod to Lewis's Space Trilogy.

I gather that Dr. Black was giving her drugs, not really trying to help the boy's mother, but gave that story when the police arrived. He says she was on amphetamines, which are pills, not injections, but she had all those needle tracks and he was giving her another injection when the boy found them.

But what does Dr. Death mean when he says, "But if you start the book again we'll all be back...You're too young to realize it yet, but it's the same with you"?

It seems like it could be some kind of religious reference to the resurrection or something, but that doesn't seem to be the kind of insight Wolfe would believe comes with age. Or maybe he's saying that we keep fighting the same battles over and over again as we age?

I don't get it. Anyone have better ideas?

-Rostrum

William Ansley — 17 Apr 2000, 00:36 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum (Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu>) wrote:
I finally got a copy of this book and will probably be posting about some of the stories over the next few days.

Good, I will be interested to hear what you have to say. This is one of my favorite Wolfe anthologies, in part because it contains "The Eyeflash Miracles," about which I wrote a long series of posts which are the closest thing I have to a claim to fame in this list (aside from a tendency to be cranky).

Are the quotations in this story from an existing Sci-Fi Pulp, or did Wolfe invent them? They seem exactly like what I know of H.G. Wells's "Island of Doctor Moreau" is about, although I've never read it. I wonder if naming the hero Ransom was a nod to Lewis's Space Trilogy.

I am sure that Wolfe made them up. The similarity to The Island of Doctor Moreau is (IMO) deliberate and serves to indicate that this is derivative "hack" sf. (I have read Moreau and the similarity is not as great as you may think; certainly there is no ancient Lemurian civilization in Wells' book.)

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she was on amphetamines, which are pills, not injections, but she had all those needle tracks and he was giving her another injection when the boy found them.

My impression is that Dr. Black *was* trying to help Tackman's mother. I think she got her drugs from other sources, sources which included Jason (her toy boy lover). She passed out at the party, probably because of mixing alcohol with some other drug and Dr. Black was trying to revive her. I don't know why Doctor Death wanted to show Tackman his mother getting an injection. I also don't know if he meant it to result in benefit or harm for Tackman.

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I don't get it either. My only thought is that Tackman Babcock is a character in a book, just like Doctor Death (well, not "Just like"; Doctor Death is a character in a book in a book). But why getting older will make him realize that he is in a book, I have no idea.

William Ansley

Jim Jordan — 17 Apr 2000, 16:39 · follows William Ansley

Some exegesis of this story, grist for your mills:

1. The island is almost an island, but not quite, and is not really on the map. Thus, it is like the island in the pseudo-novel.
2. The House of 31 February is not quite on the calendar. There's no such date, but some months do have 31 days, so it's "almost but not quite" on the calendar. Calendar -- time -- is a clear theme: The aunts are named May and Julie (July). It's winter. The year is about to "start all over again." See No. 21 below.
3. The book's cover shows Ransom struggling and apparently defeating an apeman. This anticipates the narrative in the semi-real world. Also, surely Ransom is a nod to Lewis, and to Jesus. Compare Ransom's wrestling with the Morlockian Un-Man in **Perelandra**. Also remember that humanity made itself bestial by listening to a serpent at the beginning of time.
4. TACK MAN BAB COCK seems significant. I don't know about "tack", but Man-Bab would be man-baby, and cock would be the wake-up call. The boy grows up a bit in the story, receiving a wakeup call from cold reality. For more on the name, see 24 below.
5. A trip to the drugstore with Jason also anticipates later events, Jason as providing drugs for Mom. But the drugstore also provides the book, which I shall argue stands for the Bible. One can get either good or bad from this place. (If we read the story negatively, which I don't think would be right, the novel is a drug and Tackman is being drugged by it.) Notice also by way of anticipation the armed policeman (compare the knights and the police later on) and the fearful dog (compare Bruno later on). Lots of narrative foreshadowing here.

6. I note a SHEEP-skin coat on p. 14. Tackman is protected from the weather by this. Wearing it, he meets Jesus (Captain Ransom). Ransom is taller than Tackman, but shaking Ransom-Jesus' hands makes Tackman feel taller and older. Dr. Death does not have this effect on Tackman. That by itself is interesting, since the atheistic brand of existentialism (Heidegger; Sartre) would say that it is reflection on death that makes us become real men. Is Wolfe attacking this notion, and saying that encountering Jesus is the real way to grow up?

7. The semi-real life Dr. Death would seem to be Dr. Black. Death smokes cigarettes; Black smokes cigars.

8. Death and Ransom are wrestlers who put on a show, but only under the spotlight, according to Death. How do we take this? Wolfe's belief is that death is God's servant, and that Satan is also, though an unwilling one. We know full well from the Bible (as Wolfe would say) that the last enemy Jesus will defeat is death, so Tackman is right that Ransom will kill Death. But for now, they wrestle. That "wrestling under the spotlight" is how God has organized history, as a way of redeeming fallen humanity, for God did not immediately destroy death; it will happen only at the end.

9. Here's as good a place as any to note that we are told in detail every morsel of food Tackman eats. Is this one of Wolfe's "sacramental" hints?

9a. (I don't want to renumber all these, so I'll insert this). The "bad" people convey Tackman by automobiles, but Ransom arrives on a boat. Compare the boat as the Church (built, like Noah's Ark, with a "nave").

10. My guess is that within the pulp novel, as used by Wolfe, Talar figures the Church, the enemy of Dr. Death, who is being corrupted by him. Ransom must rescue her. She corresponds to Mom-Barbara, rescued by Tackman at the end.

11. The fact that Bruno, the SAINT Bernard, does not like Talar, only indicates that she is in need of ransoming. She has fought Death in the past, but she herself is not yet "on the side of the angels." She is like the not-yet-redeemed Church, and also like Mom -- beautiful Mom, who needs salvation.

12. Again, within the layered "use" of this pseudo-novel by Wolfe, Bruno would seem to be the pastors of the Church. There was more than one St. Bruno during the Middle Ages. As St. Bernard dogs rescue travellers, so Bruno rescues Ransom. It is the job of saints to "rescue" Christ (His witness) in times of forgetfulness.

13. Tackman reads this book as one might read the Bible. It forms his guide. Also, it puts it away "reverently" (p. 20). (All my pagination is from the current edition, btw.) IMO, this is a major key to the story. As Tackman reads the book, it comes alive for him, so that Bruno comes to comfort him in the middle of the night, the way a saint might come to visit a Catholic. (See 22 below on Bruno as talking animal on Christmas Eve.) Not mentioned but clear to the reader is Tackman's nervous tension as he anticipates his mother's wedding to Dr. Black. That's why he doesn't sleep, and needs comfort.

14. Talar's people are "of old" and have become twisted in form. Ransom has been brought to make them new? Compare beautiful Mom and her more twisted sisters -- all "old" to Tackman.

15. The word "hypocrisy" means "masked." I think the masks at the wedding relate to this. These people are somehow fakes. They have hidden agendas.

16. Jason is dressed as a pirate with a whip. Probably the Jason of Greek myth is alluded to. Jason had numerous affairs. Mom is Barbara, not Medea. Were any of Jason's women non-Greek "barbarians"? Is there an allusion here to anything specific? Jason as Heroic Playboy of myth does seem to fit the story, not least as a foil for Ransom, the real hero. In the pseudo-novel, Jason is Bolo. In "real life," Jason does not seem to be a servant of Dr. Black, but both are supplying drugs to Mom.

17. At the party, Ransom is dressed in rags, but they are clean and starched. Again, a decent enough picture of Jesus, and a humble contrast to all the finery of the masked hypocrites.

18. The men dressed in armor (knights) are from the City (Jerusalem? the Church's pastors?) and are there to watch over Talar (church). Dr. Death does not want Tackman to meet them. Instead, he shows Tackman the reality of his mother's plight. Thus, he serves a good end. We can plug in a more positive assessment of Heidegger and Sartre here, but only if death drives us to become "taller" as a result of meeting Captain Ransom.

19. At the end of the pseudo-novel, Death is killed and Ransom departs and leaves Talar. Well, that's the New Testament narrative, right down to Jesus' departure, leaving the Church behind, delivered.

20. If you start the book over, re-read the bible, you can read the story again.

20a. The bull-man also. Is this an allusion to the sin at the golden calf? More generally to man's hearkening to the voice of a serpent (animal) and becoming like an animal? Recall that the bull-man of sinful Judaism is slain when Dr. Death's house is destroyed, and so (we may assume) is Bolo, the sinful Gentiles (compare Jason).

21. The last lines: essentially, "You'll be back. You're too young to realize it...." My guess is that this typically Wolfean cryptic ending means that as we re-read the Book of Books, we see ourselves therein. Also, given Catholicism, the Church Year recapitulates the history of redemption, and as one moves through it, this is like re-reading the Book. Thus the calendar theme. The House of February 31 takes us off the (church) calendar, but the story restores Tackman to it, in a sense, as he moves to the mainland and into real time, real space.

22. When does this take place? Well, it's winter. There's a party, which might have been a wedding party. Christmas? It would be very Wolfean if it were. If "animals can talk on Christmas Eve," well then Bruno (in a vision) speaks to Tackman the night before the wedding feast. Of course, this story predates the later Christmas Eve story by almost 30 years, so Wolfe might not have been thinking of that legend. Yet it does fit.

23. Other notes: Ransom goes to Talar's village to get help in defeating Dr. Death. Tackman runs to a neighboring house, where a lady lives, to get help to save his mother.

24. The cops are sure that Dr. Black has only been giving Barbara helpful injections, but she has needle marks all over her arms. And the amphetamines are taken orally (right), and we assume Jason has supplied them. Both want Barbara, but Tackman (strengthened -- made taller -- by Ransom) saves her. Thus, Barbara is like Talar, and Tackman like Ransom. Ransom tacked his way across the sea, so perhaps this explains the first part of Tackman's name. As a cock, Tackman sounded the warning that brought the police.

I don't submit this as definitive, but as a first stab. Anyone have any responses?

Nutria

Jeremy Crampton — 24 Apr 2000, 08:40 · follows Jim Jordan

From: Jim Jordan <jbjordan at gnt.net>

interesting, since the atheistic brand of existentialism (Heidegger; Sartre) would say that it is reflection on death that makes us become real men.

I wonder if you could define what you mean by "atheistic existentialism" and how that includes the work of Heidegger.

Thanks,

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