

The Ziggurat again. Sorry.

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 21 Jun 2000

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Tony Ellis — 21 Jun 2000, 16:13

Once again, apologies for resurrecting another topic everyone else go bored of five months ago.

Skimming hastily past any reviews or posts on Strange Travelers, I quickly got the impression that The Ziggurat was the most controversial story in the collection. Now that I've finally read it, I almost feel let down. Relieved, certainly. My feelings on the key issues:

1. Misogyny. Emery's assertion that men love unconditionally, women conditionally, is at best simplistic and at worst patronising, but if we're going to start calling this misogynistic we're going to have to invent a whole new word to describe all the other, far worse, things that misogyny used to mean.

The same applies to Wolfe's portrayal of Jan: it's an unsympathetic depiction of an unsympathetic woman. That's not misogyny.

2. Emery the child abuser. Nothing in the way Emery thinks or behaves, throughout the story, backs up Jan's accusation.

The clincher for me is the scene where Emery makes the girls turn around while he undresses. Wolfe has one of the twins, scolded for peeking, say "but I've seen Daddy in his underwear before" or words to that effect. If she'd said "but I've seen Daddy with no clothes on before" that would be pretty ominous, obviously. But she doesn't. Y-fronts good, no y-fronts bad. That is the law. Are we not men?

3. Emery killed everyone, imagined the aliens and the ziggurat. Eh? What clues does Wolfe *ever* give us that this might be the case?

More to the point, why on earth go to the trouble of writing such a long story about aliens, space ships, and encounters in snowy woods if we're supposed to assume, at the end of it, that everything that happened was just empty fabrication? There's a length for stories that end up by saying "haha, for you see, it was all a dream!" and that length is short. Super short.

4. Emery's attraction to Tamar is incestuous, or implicitly incestuous, or in some other way disturbing. I suspect that people's feelings here are shaped by how they already feel about Emery. If you feel that there is something unhealthy about his attitude to either women or children, surprise surprise, you feel uneasy about the story ending with him having a childlike woman in his power.

I felt that Emery was an embittered, probably quite hard to live with, guy, but a good man and certainly a good family man, so for me this scene wasn't disturbing.

I would really like to know what the significance of the Lion Inn biro and "God Save The Queen" is. The idea that it's the Lion of Judah seems a bit of a leap for a woman from 500 years in the

future to make. It doesn't help that I was rather under the impression that in America the tune we Brits know as God Save the Queen was known as "My Country Tis Of Thee."

Why doesn't Emery think that is what she was humming?

Why does the lion emblem make her hum it?

Tony Ellis
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Michael Andre-Driussi — 21 Jun 2000, 13:01 · follows Tony Ellis

And nobody ever says anything at all about "The Haunted Boardinghouse." I should like to complain.

=mantis=

Adam Stephanides — 22 Jun 2000, 09:53 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Tony Ellis wrote:

It
doesn't help that I was rather under the impression that in America the
tune we Brits know as God Save the Queen was known as "My Country Tis Of
Thee."

We know it as both (or at least I do), having heard you Brits sing "God Save the Queen" in films and such.

--Adam

Jim Jordan — 24 Jun 2000, 10:43 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 05:13 PM 6/21/2000 +0100, you wrote:

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and "God Save The Queen" is. The idea that it's the Lion of Judah seems
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Why doesn't Emery think that is what she was humming?

I don't know, and I'm not going to read it AGAIN now, and what I'm going to write here is definitely a stretch, but maybe someone can do something with it. So here it is. One of Wolfe's favorite stories is "Westwind," where he allegorizes the Church as an inn. Similarly, in *There Are Doors* the Italian Restaurant, which is one of the doors back into a pagan world (the really ancient world of earth-goddess worship), is the Roman Catholic Church -- again, an inn of sorts. Of course, this runs back to the traditional understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Jesus as the Samaritan; inn as the church, innkeeper as the pastor, etc.). Wolfe is unquestionably working with this symbolism.

The Church is Daughter Zion, the Bride of Christ. Again, that's not just in the Bible, it's all over Wolfe as well. So it is part of his stock symbolic vocabulary. (Think of Hyacinth and Silk.) [I'm trying not to import or impose anything onto Wolfe that cannot be found there.]

Tamar is a bit of daughter and bit of bride. She comes from a world of women. In terms of what I've brought before us above, the Queen MIGHT be somehow analogous to the Church, and thus the Lion's Inn also to the Church, as the kingdom presided over by the Lion of Judah (Jesus). In

Wolfe's conservative, Roman Catholic mind, the Church is definitely threatened today by secular humanism. Perhaps he has in mind that in the future, the Church/Bride/Women have been threatened by Humanism/Men, and this accounts for their hostility to Men.

This thesis, of course, requires a re-reading of the text to see if such a symbolic substructure might work. But it is extremely typical of Wolfe to toss in something odd at the end of a story that forces the reader to re-read the story in a different way. This seems to be that "surprise." I point out that a Ziggurat is a religious shrine, and in the Bible, the "ladder to heaven" seen by Jacob in Genesis 28 is the "true" version of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The same language is used. Jesus alludes to this at the end of the first chapter of the gospel of John, where He says that His disciples will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man (the New Jacob) as the "gateway of heaven," the base of this true ziggurat.

Recall that Severian is not a Christ-figure, but a Christian figure, a man with a horrible past on the way to something better. Silk is similar, but more obvious. Is Emory the same type of character? The Ziggurat descends on him, and he becomes a new base of a better truer ziggurat/ladder that might make for a better future.

In terms of symbolism, the Zig descends from above into water. This could well be an allusion to baptism, or to the waters that covered the original world, out of which a new world might grow. The old Zig needs to be abandoned and destroyed, that a new, and true, Zig might be erected. The old Zig is already starting to flood (compare Noah). The snow falling from above might also be a baptismal image (compare the windy snow in Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" in the "darkest evening of the year" [Christmas Eve] -- though Wolfe might not have Frost in mind).

Consider that in Emory's world (our world) men and women are estranged. That's because men are cruel, and women have become identitarian feminists as something of a reaction to men. Wolfe does not approve of identitarian feminism (women as basically the same as men). He does approve of a feminism that seeks to restore women as true equals, though as different from men. The resolution of the story, thus, might point not only to a new opportunity for Emory as an individual, but also point towards a new and better kind of future. The original future, from which the women come, is a development of present trends, estranging women from men. A better future is now possible, with Emory as the Lion (Christian figure) who protects and nourishes the Queen.

Consider also the snow-filled world of Emory in another way: as a symbol of the frozen alienated situation in the present times (in Wolfe's view, of course), and link it to the frozen world of Master Ash, which is the evil eschatology (ragnarok) that is avoided when Severian floods the world, making possible the good eschatology of the Edenic Green Man. If my hypothesis is right, then the marriage of Emory and Tamar would be the beginning of such a new and positive better future.

As always, the trick with Wolfe is to figure out whether he is "building" on a Greek myth, on some other writer (SF or mainstream), or on the Biblical material, or some mixture of all of these, or writing something brand new. "Queen and Lion," as well as the overall thrust of the story, hint to me that the Biblical material is in the background of this particular story. Grist for your mill.

Nutria (JBJordan)