

The Haunted Boardinghouse

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 23 Jun 2000

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Robert Borski — 23 Jun 2000, 22:12

I've been wanting to write an in-depth analysis of "The Haunted Boardinghouse" for some time. Unfortunately, it does not now look like I will have the temporal wherewithal to do the necessary research and cognitive digging involved (to say nothing of the fact that I'm currently between airports), so forgive me if the following version seems somehow cobbled together from notes and is not particularly cohesive. It has been and isn't.

In my opinion, the key to understanding a big part of THB can be found on p. 232 of STRANGE TRAVELERS: "Hell was a labyrinth like the Minotaur's." This makes Seely both Hades and Minos, and his wife Persephone/Pasiphae (recall that Mrs. Seely is usually called "the maiden," which is also what Kore means in Greek; also that Pasiphae bewitched Minos so that he would give his illicit lovers a terrible venereal disease; cf. Mrs. Seely's remark, "Paul Snyder [a chemist, so probably Daedalus] swears you can't infect me.") The fighting bull or buffalo encountered at the end is obviously both minotaur and horned devil, while the boy who falls to his death from a height as he tries to escape the labyrinth is almost certainly Icarus; Enan does find "an irregular clump of wilted feathers," remember, and "Wade" may be some sort of wordplay by Wolfe since Icarus drowns. As for Enan himself, if he's not Theseus, he may well be Aeneas, another harrower of hell--Aeneas/Enan (note again the nested name) is also more than likely an ancestral link back to Marcus Junius Pera and the Army of Rome. How this relates to the varied architectural faces of the boardinghouse I'm not sure--either hell is timeless or the labyrinth is both temporal *and* spatial; this at least would help to explain how Enan is later able to see Wade climbing out a window after he's already supposedly fallen to his death.

Also worth mentioning, if must needs briefly so, are the bevy of literary works and authors Wolfe mentions throughout THB. W.H. Hudson seems particularly important, as is John Ruskin, whose cited QUEEN OF THE AIR (1869) is itself about Greek Myth (Gratutious quote: "A myth, in its simplest definition, is a story with a meaning attached to it, other than it seems to have at first; and the fact that it has such a meaning is generally marked by some of its circumstances being extraordinary, or, in the common use of the word, unnatural"). Two of Ruskin's works were also translated into French by one Marcel Proust after he gave up on JEAN SANTEUIL--yet another reason Wolfe may have chosen to incorporate him.

So will that do you for now, normal bean of jizma?

Robert Borski

Tony Ellis — 24 Jun 2000, 14:55 · follows Robert Borski

I don't think that Greek myth is the key to this story. There's a case for seeing the house as the Labyrinth, in which case I would call burly, red-faced Headmaster Seely the minotaur, rather than Minos, but I think that's about as far as it goes. I think you'll find that, this being the Second Punic War and all, the "great animal, a fighting bull or a buffalo" that Enan hears at the end of the story had a trunk, not horns. :-)

As for Wade being Icarus etc. The boy who fell out of the window did so a long time ago, when it was still an outside window. So Wade isn't the boy isn't Icarus. The bundle of feathers is on the roof because a bloody great falcon is also on the roof.

I also don't feel that the architecture is that significant, beyond the extended tribute to Little, Big. The different faces of the house don't open onto their respective time periods. The bedroom door Enan opens onto the darkling landscape is in the Tudor side of the house. Enan is able to go back to the early days of Rome because he's dead, and because that's where Death is nice enough to take him.

The pale maiden Enan sees is Death. That's why when Enan says that she is Mrs Seely she agrees "Yes. I am his bride." And why she says of the cutthroat "he tries so hard to win a smile from me." Terrible, terrible pun there. Her shadow races with the death-bringing falcon, and she hangs around Enan because he's at death's door for most of the story.

Enan only sees the past of the boardinghouse when he is in her presence, when the light from her lamp makes the walls transparent. The first time she walks with him is an out of body experience, I'm not sure about the second.

Now here's the thing that's really doing my head in. When Enan meets Seely, Seely says that the Doctor has recently seen him, although Enan has no memory of this. Mrs Boyle goes to fetch the feversish Enan another blanket. He awakes with it over his head, meets Death again. As they stroll he notices that his arm stings. So far so good.

Then Wade says something that turns all this upside down. He says "Mrs Boyle came in with another blanket, and you were dead. They sent for the doctor... and he gave you injections." Now it -sounds- like he's talking about Enan when he first comes to the boardinghouse. That's what Enan assumes. But what about that blanket?

When Enan wakes up after meeting Seely, the blanket Seely sent Mrs Boyle for is over Enan's head. There's only one time when we leave people like that. Right on cue, Death turns up. And then, when they walk, he gets that pain in the arm. Because the doctor injected it earlier? Or because wherever his body is, the doctor is currently injecting it?

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Adam Stephanides — 24 Jun 2000, 16:56 · follows Tony Ellis

Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

And nobody ever says anything at all about "The Haunted Boardinghouse."

Here's something on "The Haunted Boardinghouse," which I had intended to post earlier but never got around to. In your excellent post on the similarities between THB and LITTLE, BIG, there was one you missed, iirc. The protagonist of THB is named Enan Bradford. Smoky Barnable's real first name, with which he signs his letter to Santa, is Evan ("Letters to Santa, II, 4, p. 166 of the Bantam trade paperback). So the protagonists are Evan Barnable and Enan Bradford.

--Adam