

Mostly Crowley

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 29 Jun 2000

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akt — 29 Jun 2000, 23:49

From: Michael Andre-Driussi <mantis at sirius.com>

OK, semi back-off:

Alga wrote:

They are not poles; they are complementary. Smoky is terribly important; he is chosen (though he is far too modest to envision himself this way).

Without him, the Tale could not be told. Look, this is a trope of Crowley's: The ordinary decent man finds himself in extraordinary circumstances, and, without believing at all in the situation which others seem to think merits action, agrees to do what is asked of him,

to do his duty. It is the existential situation in a fairytale setting.

Not only Smoky, but Rush who Speaks (from ES) and Pierce Moffit (from the Aegypt series) are heroes of this sort, and I think that Loren Casaubon from Beasts started out this way, though he sort of dribbled off (like the book). But to reiterate, JCs guys do their damn duty.

That

is their task, their quest, and because they take up that burden, willingly or not (Smoky is willing), the world whirrs.

Not that this will change alga's mind, but I'll list a few apparent contradictions or exceptions. SPOILERS for JC fiction to follow.

THE DEEP: the Visitor does not do his duty. IIRC, once he finally figures

out what his duty is, he decides to personally question his maker (rather

than going back and doing his duty post haste). Everybody else is busy

looking out for "number one," except for the Just--aye, there's your duty.

Agreed. This book does not fit any sort of later JC pattern.

BEASTS: a case might be made that many of the characters do not want to be

manipulated by one power, but don't mind being manipulated by another power, or they want to do the manipulating themselves (Sten, maybe;

Reynard

definitely). Difficult to define "duty" in this case, although an easy

answer would be "doing whatever Reynard wants you to do." (Rather

like
being one of the Just.)

My point was only that Loren may have been an early idea of this figure. But the fact that JC does not *do* anything with Loren (so wastefully!) seems to me to indicate that he had not yet intellectually articulated this idea.

ENGINE SUMMER: Rush-as-we-know-him does not do his duty, rather, he is like a rape victim who has just been violated for the umpteenth time. Was it his "duty" to leave Little Belaire? It didn't seem like it: rather, he wanted to follow his wayward girlfriend, and nobody could (even try to?) talk him out of it. Was it his duty to become a saint? That makes duty sound like "fate" or "destiny"--and we don't know that he became a saint, anyway.

Well, yes. But it does seem like something he had to do, just as Smoky had to follow Alice's directives for the wedding. I wouldn't argue hard for this, though it does seem to me that Rush is a little bit of a prototype for Smoky.

LITTLE, BIG: I won't argue here, since Smoky does due his duty, as you say. But I will argue again for the creepy side of the family's translation to the next world as being very much in the tradition of cult members doing their "duty" by drinking the cyanide-laced kool aid. There is a spooky/icy quality to the ending.

Not if you rejoice (as I do) in the sort of translation effect, whereupon they move on to a new and probably quite lovely phase. The truly joyous description of DA as Dame Kind seems to me to make this a parallel but even transcendent event to the wedding at the beginning of the book--I don't see creepy.

GREAT WORK OF TIME: here is a case where the hero (Denys) does his duty, and then comes to feel that the results are so horrible that he has to betray the organization and the Empire in order to undo the whole thing. (That whole "being one of the Just" thing again.)

You're the expert here--I never invoked this.

AEGYPT: at some point in DAEMONOMANIA, Pierce has a very JC hero moment (which of course is true of all of the AEGYPT series) and thinks about how hard he has tried all his life to avoid all the powers that have tried to manipulate him . . . then again, without giving anything away, Pierce himself is seeming less like Smoky Barnable and more like George Mouse. Not to say anything against George Mouse! Everybody loves him! He is practically the co-star of LITTLE, BIG. Still, there is a difference.

(If

you know what I mean you are ahead of me. <g>)

To say anything here is to invoke DAEMONOMANIA, which you and I have read, but I don't think anyone else has. So we have to cool it. (But I love George Mouse too, that incestuous old creep.)

In response to Nutria:

Dumb me, no doubt, but a mystery left in my mind from Engine Summer is that the people never seem to eat any food and seem to be sustained entirely on St. Bea's Bread smoke. Okay, okay, allusions to marijuana maybe. But as this is an SF tale, something other than magic must be at work. Rush and his buddy seem to last a whole winter with no food, in a trance.

I'm sure someone has this figured out. So do me a favor, whydoncha, and lemme in on the answer.

Not that this is a final answer, of course, bfwiv I thought the allusion was to hashish rather than marijuana. And "hash" is the name of a foodstuff, too.

As for the sfnal rational, the stuff was brought back by an interstellar probe. Like you said before, mana from heaven.

The winter they spent in a trance, that was due to a different substance, wasn't it? (Probably one of the daughters of medicine: those four little pots. One was birth allowance, one was lighten the load, one was near immortality) Because the St. Bea's Bread was something they smoked three or four times a day, no big deal; but that winter in the treehouse was something different for Rush That Speaks, iirc.

Go Ask Alice, I think she knows.

Why, Ratty, have you never spent winter in a trance? No, I don't believe it! OK, yes, I can sort of explain this without reference to the text, though I will do my scholarly duty if pressed.

JC is making a drug joke, as he makes many through the book--it is without doubt the druggiest book I have ever read, including others, supposedly mainstream, that were touted in the 60s and 70s. I've forgotten (without looking up) the specifics of the four pots, the daughters of medicine, but the effect here is to cause hibernation, just like bear hibernation. I don't think that's so weird.

Honestly, Ratty, I am perplexed by your reactions both to this book and to LB. The sort of mellow and amused side to the drug culture (by which I do not mean sinister drugs) of the era can't be possibly be so foreign to you unless you are from another planet (which of course is possible). I think of you as a savvy reader. It's a comment on the times Why does it upset you so much? (Not snide, honestly interested.)

-alga

Jim Jordan — 30 Jun 2000, 14:08 · follows akt

Honestly, Ratty, I am perplexed by your reactions both to this book and to LB. The sort of mellow and amused side to the drug culture (by which I do not mean sinister drugs) of the era can't be possibly be so foreign to you unless you are from another planet (which of course is possible). I think of you as a savvy reader. It's a comment on the times Why does it upset you so much? (Not snide, honestly interested.)

-alga

Well, it does not upset me. I'm not real cognizant of the "mellow and amused side of the drug culture" bit, so I have to rely on people who are to fill in the gaps in my perception.

As for me, since you are interested: I've been an evangelical Christian all my life, and, like a great many people, I've never done any kind of drugs (unless you count alcohol as such). At the same time, as a Calvinist, I have no objection in principle to the (moderate) use of recreational drugs; and as a conservative-libertarian of sorts, I'm not in favor of present-day US drug policies, for a variety of reasons. But, since their use is presently outlawed in our society, and since I feel no compelling need to use them, I never have. So, I'm not terribly alert to oblique allusions to them; I've not been in that "world."

I raised the question with reference to LB because it seemed to me that the characters are generally all descending into a bad place from a good beginning. Based on your interview with JC, I have to set aside such a reading, of course. But what I was wondering at the time was whether JC himself was entering a caution about drugs. I suppose he was not. I'm not a deconstructionist, and I have no interest in imposing my own opinions on the writings of anyone. I was only interested in what JC himself was getting at, interested in understanding the text as the author intended it.

What I personally do not like about the character of George Mouse, though he has some admirable qualities, is his pretty self-conscious engagement in incest, which as an evangelical Calvinist I DO object to!

FWIW, the two JCs that I really like are ES and GWOT. And I did not see the ending as some kind of rape. In fact, I found the ending rather moving, a sort of neoplatonic ascent to heaven as it were. But I no longer trust my readings of JC, and will leave it to others, and stick with interpreting writers I'm more in tune with, like Linebarger and Wolfe!

I trust that this reply better fixes my opinions for you.

Nutria