

preliminary notes for PEACE

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 17 Oct 2000

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 17 Oct 2000, 13:54

Let's see, now where was I . . . ?

(I first tried to send this on Sep. 28th; since then I've been chatting a bit with Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, mostly about the frametale [in AD 2277; so yes, Alex, we've been thinking along the lines you have], and Roy Lackey, mostly about the historical timeline from 1904 to 1975 or so. All of which should soon be showing up around here.)

A few important touchstones for my view of PEACE.

Obviously this is a book about books, and we could list all of the books mentioned, alluded to, read from, et cetera. But I would like to mention only a few:

THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS (aka THE ARABIAN NIGHTS): this is important not only for the way that characters all tell stories, but how their stories are nested within one another, and how their stories often play off one another. This is a huge part of PEACE, and then there are the little details, like the Persian Room in the memory mansion, and the story-fragment of "ben Yahya and the marid," which is quite important.

Fairy Tales collected by Andrew Lang: the smorgasbord approach, with stories from all sorts of different cultures, yet all having that quirky "fairy tale logic" which darts here and there. (I've been reading fairy tales lately, and wow, are they wild and savage!)

SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE by Kurt Vonnegut: the "unstuck in time" idea; the blurring of memory and active re-enactment, of fact and fantasy. The first time I read PEACE I thought of it as S5 crossed with Faulkner--I didn't ever really grasp that Den might be dead; and in fact, while I recognize all the "grave tree" pointers, having just re-read the novel I find myself questioning the whole "Dead Den" aspect anew: in this context, what is "dead," anyway? (More on this, whenever I talk about the frametale and the house of the ax.)

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Enough of that for now. On to another touchstone.

Julius Smart is called by Den the central character of the book; the section devoted to him is titled "The Alchemist," and Smart tells part of the tale of Mr. Tilly, who had the power to transform ordinary people into circus freaks (the conclusion of this tale is supplied by the banker, Stewart Blaine, in section four). Smart later develops the method of transforming potatoes into a pseudo-citrus beverage that makes him unbelievably rich (gold). How large a part does "alchemy" play in the novel? (Also note: the section is physically central to the novel, so there is no doubt that Den is having his little pun.)

This is what I told to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes:

"Alchemy: . . . It was essentially a symbolic process involving the endeavour to make gold, regarded as the symbol of illumination and salvation. The four stages of the process were signified by different colours, as follows" (Cirlot, THE DICTIONARY OF SYMBOLS, hereafter in table form)

- 1) Black (guilt, origin, latent forces)
- 2) White (minor work, first transmutation, quicksilver)
- 3) Red (sulphur, passion)
- 4) Gold

Just looking at this sequence brought to mind the five sections of the novel:

- 1) "Alden Dennis Weer"--which is shaped by the injury of Bobby Black.
- 2) "Olivia"--which is about the courtship of Olivia, shaped by the white egg.
- 3) "The Alchemist"--which is about Julius Smart and involves murderous passions.
- 4) "Gold"--which is about the Gold family, and the buried gold.
- 5) "The President"--which is about Den as president.

So then I continued:

Well "Black" at the guilty beginning (Bobby), and "Gold" at the fourth step (Lou), that looks like a pretty close fit at least at those two points.

If it holds out, then maybe the fifth stage is the assaying of the gold; that is, the looking back on the whole thing from the ghostly point of view. In his own way, Den the President is a result of a process, like the Philosopher King who was to be produced by Plato's *Republic*, and like Severian the Great by his education in the world: and we come to see that he is a false one (the gold is fake).

To be fair, there are other systems of dividing the alchemical process that use seven stages and non-color descriptions. But because of the Black/Gold congruence I have been haunted by this four stage, four color one for some time now, without carrying the investigation any further.

=mantis=

Alex David Groce — 17 Oct 2000, 17:03 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

<vast snippage>

Very nice, mantis.

On the "dead Den" thesis, I think it is proper to see this as a purgatorial fantasy. In my opinion, the final moments of the book do indicate that Weer has finished his business with all of the stories (tacking them down on the desk) and is heading to join his Aunt in paradise.

SPOILERS for Robert Irwin's THE ARABIAN NIGHTMARE follow.

I became more convinced of this after reading Robert Irwin's THE ARABIAN NIGHTMARE. I have no idea if Irwin has read any Wolfe (they have some curiously similar choices of vocabulary, at any rate), but THE ARABIAN NIGHTMARE seems to be the opposite situation. In PEACE the recursive nesting of stories is finally broken--Weer, I think, hasn't finished telling any of the stories, but he's come to terms with his place in them. The stories aren't finished because they aren't *his* stories, alone, but shared with others (hence Smart as the real protagonist). The

escape is one of breaking out of the nested levels of storytelling (as with the headrest, "popping the stack"). In Irwin's work (which I strongly recommend to all Lupines) the opposite, I think, occurs. The nesting continues infinitely, spiralling downwards into inconclusion, confusion, and madness. The "Ape of God," Satan is the opposite of God, the true author. Satan cannot finish a story, only avoid properly ending one. The main character of TAN is trapped in an endless, exhausting "untelling" while Weer is freed by breaking out of all the stories once he has come to terms with his role in them. Although it is difficult to "prove" this from the texts, Wolfe's story has a strong implication of eventual release into another state (especially with the placing of the sidhe story) and is thus a Purgatorial fantasy, while Irwin provides one of the most chilling and disturbing visions of Hell in all of fantasy: endless suffering without redemption or even _memory_, "beginnings" without their necessary endings, and a vast and evil _boredom_.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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James Jordan — 17 Oct 2000, 22:26 · follows Alex David Groce

I don't have the time to do this at all right now, but do you think there might be a link between Peace and "The Island of Dr. Death"? I'm thinking of Dr. Black here.

Patera Nutria

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