

And Why Did They Appear?

The Urth list — 6 messages, 3 voices, 17 Oct 2000

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Talarican — 17 Oct 2000, 19:43

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I thought Tony Ellis' suggestion that House was itself a trap and danger, al la HAL 9000 or Harlan Ellison's AM, was intriguing but not a total explanation. Tony's suggestion that the freezer as refuge might become an inescapable tomb for Sherby under the rubble of the house occurred to me also.

Unlike Mr. Million, a purely artificial variant of cyborg into which the actual synapses of a human are mapped, House appears to be ultimately just a "cybernetic servomechanism". House is highly intelligent but apparently programmed by conventional means, and is bound, in true sci-fi AI tradition, by a set of "prime directives" which governs its behavior. Furthermore, House is stationary and incapable of fleeing danger.

So what were House' prime directives and duties? House obviously acts as a head servant, literally a butler, in charge of the household, and serves as Sherby's tutor and guardian. House cannot allow Sherby to leave with anyone, even the human servants(?), without the explicit approval of the parents, even though they now cannot approve. House operates the Learning Center, tutoring his charge according to a curriculum, often in the guise of play.

Now House finds itself in a situation for which its designers and programmers did not equip it: the master and mistress are dead; it is increasingly being cut off from supplies and communication with the outside world as the insurrection grows; it is caught between its mandate to protect and care for the boy, and the impending end of its ability to do so; and it faces its own imminent demise. It seems reasonable to suppose that House could be "cracking" under the stress a bit. In the sequel to _2001_, remember, HAL9000's breakdown was explained by Clarke as being caused by a situation - being subjected to deliberate deception - for which the designers of its synthetic psychology neglected to allow.

I'm just a bit uncomfortable with attributing all of House' actions to insanity, though. "Crazed Robot Guardian" stories are as old as science fiction, and I like to think Mr. Wolfe had something less shopworn to contribute.

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Note that House decides to have this Christmas party for Sherby immediately after the reconnaissance of Mouse and Kite reveals the extremity of the situation, therefore the decision was a response to the observation. In my interpretation, House realizes it has one brief opportunity to give Sherby a final lesson before he is torn from its grasp and sent forth. Therefore, I viewed House' actions primarily as an endgame whose object was to teach Sherby something vitally important in those last moments. Given just hours, at most, to impart a final

message to a young sheltered boy about to be snatched into a totally different existence, what would it be?

{I also am reminded of the dispersal-of-knowledge-to-the-barbarians idea played in BNS (the ransacking of Castle Baldanders; Cyriaca's thinking engines in their decline, discoursing with their disciples), although it's stretch to attribute such motives to House, who surely has no reason to be concerned about the future welfare of strange rebels.}

The first visitor is none other than the "reformed" Ebenezer Scrooge. He explains quite frankly his mission, if you like, and superficially it sounds like a cornball line from that Bill Murray movie adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*: "...in order that you may know a great secret...that there is a vagrant magic in Christmas still...". Of course, Dickens' Scrooge, visited by phantoms, learned an important truth while there was still time, thus I tend to interpret his presence as another signal that Sherby is supposed to learn truths from House's artificial phantoms just before it is too late, also.

I actually had to reread *A Christmas Carol* to catch the connection of Ali Baba. Now, of all the details from *ACC* to toss out, why that fleeting mention of Ali Baba? Then again, I still don't understand the significance of Smokey.

Next comes Fox-Loki and the club dancers, followed by the Yule log party. Wolfe signals that they symbolize the insurrection mob who is to come. The Yule log party bumping the door with their wood foreshadows the mob later banging at the door with their log battering ram. Sherby thinks he glimpses the 'fox' in the crowd milling around the house. Ali Baba and the Yule log party build a holo-fire; of course the mob later builds one for real.

Then, the fox explains yet more pagan sun-symbolism to Sherby and directs his attention to the wheel of fire rolling down the mountain (courtesy of the advancing rebels) and its connection to the holly wreath, a symbol of, yes, the sun's 'wheel of fire'. 'Yule', BTW, is said to come from the Anglo-Saxon word for 'wheel', a metaphor for the sun and for time.

If the Yule party symbolizes the insurrectionists, what is the point? The club dance and the Yule log are explained as pagan solstice rituals designed to ensure the Sun's return in the spring in spite of the depredations of Loki-the-fox who seeks to steal it. The decadent civilization of Sherby's parents is undergoing destruction and renewal, just as the coming of the New Sun caused the destruction of the old Urth. Is House trying to explain to Sherby that the insurrection is just a cusp in a civilization's cycle of decay and rebirth, and that all of life is composed of such?

Christmas Rose and Knecht Rupprecht also speak of themselves as representing renewal, and its precursor Death. Knecht Rupprecht tells Sherby another 'secret': his preChristian pagan connection with fertility-through-death-and-decay, another cyclic renewal theme. Is this death-and-renewal cycle, and the pagan celebration of it, the "vagrant magic" to which Scrooge referred?

Other figures seem to represent the historical reality buried behind the modern traditions of Christmas: Bishop Nicholas of Myra, Fr. Eddi (Eddius Stephanus, a writer of chants and music, he wrote a hagiography of the mentioned St. Wilfred, a missionary who persuaded British Celtic clerics to observe Roman liturgy and the supremacy of the Pope). And of course another "realistic" figure is introduced in His turn. There seems to be a play of twins and opposites and counterparts (the quintessential Wolfen theme) on several levels: solid v. holo, historical v. folklore, Christian v. pagan, and so forth.

It is interesting to note that House-as-itself kept warning Sherby against visiting the corpses of his parents in the freezer, even as House-as-Father-Eddi advised him to take refuge there. Why, if not due to insanity? Could the freezer paradox represent "second thoughts" on House' part as the rebels actually enter the estate. I have to agree that at this point Wolfe (not House) is apparently giving Sherby an opportunity to choose change and life, over literally frozen adherence to a vanished past.

Or, perchance, there is a plan at work here, a scheme not necessarily of House.

Sherby "finds Jesus", so literally so that he does not recognize Him, thinking him just another kid like himself (isn't that the point?). Later, as the mob breaks in, he glimpses the child Jesus again, but House implicitly denies generating Him. Is this a "Lo I am with you always" message of hope imparted by a higher power than House or Carker's Army?

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James Jordan — 17 Oct 2000, 22:23 · follows Talarican

----- Original Message -----

From: "Talarican" <exultnttalarican at mindspring.com>

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Talarican wrote:

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Actually, that wasn't quite what I was trying to suggest. House as a danger, yes, but as a 'mad computer', no.

I think that '...And When They Appear' is, among other things, a rite-of-passage story, as I've said before. I think that one of the "other things" it also is, however, is an exploration of the relative merits of the real versus the fantastic, the 'spiritually true' or whatever you want to call it. We're repeatedly shown that lonely little Sherby wants real things, and surely he has a point, but House's illusions, as Talarican points out, embody truths just as important.

The two themes, rite-of-passage and reality-versus-fantasy, are complementary. They're two sides of the same coin: to leave behind childhood is to stop believing in Father Christmas. "When I was a child... I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

I think that the danger House embodies is metaphysical rather than actual. It doesn't lure Sherby down to the basement in the HAL-like expectation that he will be trapped there, but to protect him. Nevertheless we, as reader, are expected to pick up on the fact that Sherby -would- have been trapped there, had he stayed, and to ponder the suggestiveness of a freezer (containing one's dead parents) as the best shelter House has to offer against brute reality. To live, Sherby has to escape House.

The insurrection, whatever its issues might be (class warfare, literally?), is total; not only riffraff and perverts like Corporal Charlie participate, but also the police and firemen.

Actually, these are House's holos, trying vainly to keep the attackers at bay - that's why one of them has the face of the fox, and nobody takes much notice of them. Yet another way of showing that fantasy and make-believe can't protect you from reality.

Is House trying to explain to Sherby that the insurrection is just a cusp in a civilization's cycle of decay and rebirth, and that all of life is composed of such?

I think that's certainly part of what it is trying to do, yes. The 'magic of Christmas' can be described on all sorts of different levels, though, and I think House really wants Sherby to learn all of them.

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