

What's so funny about PEACE, love, and understanding?

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 19 Oct 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2406>

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 19 Oct 2000, 12:01

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The rest of this contains -- obligatory warning -- Spoilers For PEACE. In particular, it involves a struggle toward understanding the frame-tale of PEACE.

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Okay, then. How to view this frame story?

Simply: It isn't just the frame; it's the real story. PEACE is not the story of Weer's life. It is the story of Weer telling (or retelling or rehashing) the story of Weer's life.

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I'll make a further assertion: I posit that Wolfe had a definite order of events, and a definite time of narration, in mind when he sat down to write PEACE.

This does not mean that we can definitely know them -- he may have deliberately effaced evidence, planted false clues, etc., to create a narrative which allows multiple, contradictory readings. But I don't think so; my sense is that Wolfe plays fair. Not everything has an answer, but everything set as a challenge does: and the nature of PEACE is clearly a challenge.

Okay, about that elm tree. If it's Weer's grave tree, then why doesn't he say so? Does he not know? Is he not permitted to know? or is he in deep denial about being dead?

The book is oddly full of evasions about death. Weer almost never mentions the deaths of anyone in the book -- the only deaths I recall being stated openly are Bobby Black's and Sherry Gold's: and both of these are characters for whose deaths he feels or may feel responsible/guilty; and both of them are characters for whose death he rather elaborately evades taking any responsibility. (Weer doesn't say he pushed Bobby down the stairs, but that Bobby "fell;" and he goes out of his way to make Sherry the instigator of everything between them, and of her death, he says only that she killed herself.)

As for the last page -- there is the odd detail about the appointment note nailed to the desk (see the beginning of part 5 to see why this is odd); but the real point is the voice of Aunt Olivia, coming over the intercom -- "Den, darling, are you awake in there?" As it interrupted the never-to-be-completed story of Princess Elaia and her suitors (and see Mantis' recent posting about that), so too it interrupts our story of Den Weer, and if it ever "comes out," we shan't know about it.

One thing the line signifies clearly: it is time to stop reading.

But why is her voice coming over the intercom? And is it to wake him or to send him (back) to sleep? Or is it just a last bit of random memory as his mind finally disintegrates?

Some onomastics:

From www.baby-names-meanings.com:

ALDEN: Defender

DENNIS: Worshipper

("4babynames.com" gives Dennis as "wild, frenzied" and derives it from Dionysius.)

John Alden, of course, was one of the signatories of the Mayflower Compact, whom we mostly know from the "Courtship of Miles Standish."

I don't find any Saint Alden; the nearest I can spot is an Aldo, visionary and giver-to-the-poor (feastday 4/26). St. Denis, on the other hand, is quite important -- missionary to Gaul, first bishop of Paris, who was martyred (along with SSs Rusticus and Eleutherius) by beheading and is thus the patron of France. His remains rest at the abbey of St-Denis in Paris (mention of which I seem to recall in Proust: and PEACE is in its way a very Proust-influenced novel). Making matters more confused, his story got munged in with those of Dionysius the Areopagite and the patristic writer pseudo-Dionysius.

Since the last name is Dutch, I checked an on-line Dutch-English dictionary (<http://dictionaries.travlang.com/DutchEnglish/>), which gives this:

weer

1. defence, defense
2. again, all over again, anew
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... while the only English meaning I find for "weer" is "wee-er," very small, or very early in the morning. Going to the nearest homonym, "weir," I get

- 1 : a fence or enclosure set in a waterway for taking fish
- 2 : a dam in a stream or river to raise the water level or divert its flow

What's particularly interesting to me is the etymology:

Etymology: Middle English were, from Old English wer; akin to Old Norse ver fishing place, Old High German werien, werren to defend. Date: before 12th century

H'mmm. There's the concept of defense again.

And then there's "Den":

- 1 : the lair of a wild usually predatory animal
- 2 a (1) : a hollow or cavern used especially as a hideout (2) : a center of secret activity
- b : a small usually squalid dwelling
- 3 : a comfortable usually secluded room
- 4 : a subdivision of a Cub Scout pack made up of two or more boys

The name then is: Defender - Worshipper/Wild one -- Defense, with a nickname meaning safe place. Is it too much to suggest that Weer is defensive about his life?

Who are the doctors that "can be consulted though dead" (a nice bit of ambiguity there -- it can be "though they are dead," but also "though I am dead"). My feeling is that they are in some sense more than just memories; that they in fact instigate W's reexamination of his life and crimes. Note for example that the very first reminiscence -- the birthday party -- is a very slippery transition in response to a question of Van Ness's:

"How old are you, Mr. Weer?"

I tell him. (My best guess.)

His mouth makes a tiny noise, and he opens the file folder he carries and tells me my birthday. It is in May, and there is a party, ostensibly for me, in the garden. I am five...

The doctors seem to be more than Weer's memory-reconstructions for "consultating." They actively guide him into remembering -- through the TAT among other things.

All right, then: suppose they are active agents seeking to bring him to "peace"? Psychopomps? Angels, sent by or through the prayers of (say) his aunts and parents? This is still a bit vague, but it seems to give the whole a kind of shape. And consider Weer's non-vision -- his feeling that if he goes out of the house, he'll see faces looking down at him (but he doesn't).

Speaking of the house.

Weer definitely built a house in life. He probably even built some "memory rooms" (which explains the "architect" comment).

But what he's wandering in is not the physical house but, coming back to it yet again, that egregious memory mansion -- or, "his life." It's his memory, conceived of as a house.

None of which is to say that he isn't also haunting his actual house. So we get Wolfe doing his typical foxy, or even Wolfey, tricks -- the house is both real and metaphorical, the memory mansion and the real mansion, overlaid upon each other but not identical, and Weer getting lost in one becomes disoriented in the other.

(And another side note, because these things just keep popping into my head: a NYRSF article Mantis brought to my attention makes a great deal about the "e" from "Werewolf" winding its way to "Weer," and since Wolfe has said that there's more of himself in Weer than any other of his characters, I guess "Weer-Wolfe" becomes a Wolfey pun, modulo this is a ghost story rather than a werewolf story...)

Weer is not a memory expert, does not have a very well organized memory; so he gets lost in his "house," which we experience as the digressive and wandering style in which he "tells" his "story."

Further, much that doubtless seemed important to Weer during life doesn't get covered in the novel: for example, he's an engineer, so he presumably went to college at some point; but I don't think we even know what college he went to ... in fact, I don't recall much mention of Weer's formal education at all. So either his education doesn't matter at all to ghost-Weer, or it's so important that he evades it; but there are none of the usual signs of evasiveness, so I conclude that it's just not important to him in his search for peace. On the other hand, the fact that he killed Bobby Black is, but he can't bring himself to say it.

Basic principle of interpretation:

Things not mentioned at all simply aren't important; things hinted at but not stated outright are (the most) important (of all).

What does it mean that he seems to be (or to believe that he is) "writing"?

From early times, memory has been conceived of as a process of writing or "inscribing"; I believe Aristotle used this metaphor. In "writing" is he in fact re-inscribing his memories -- trying, as Wolfe has said in that interview, to make sense of his life -- by revising his memory into a "preferred" version? One, say, in which he doesn't need to explicitly think about pushing Bobby Black down the stairs, in which he doesn't need to explicitly think about who locked whom in the freezer room that day in 19(38?): the "good parts" version of his own life, so to speak.

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-- but to Wolfe, I should think, this would not allow him to achieve peace; he can do so only by coming to terms with his "sins" and accepting them as sins so he can be forgiven them. (At least so I understand the doctrines regarding repentance and forgiveness.) I'm not intending here to harp on the "purgatorial" aspect, but trying rather to understand what Wolfe would expect "peace" to involve.

So after all this, oddly enough, we begin to see that PEACE actually has a very "linear" aspect: it begins with the freeing of the spirit or ghost of Alden Dennis Weer, and ends... Where? "Den, darling, are you awake in there?"

(And why is Olivia's voice coming over an intercom she almost certainly never used in life?)

Wild-assed guess: if we conclude that Den does actually achieve "peace," then Aunt Vi is inviting him to Move On to the Next Stage -- in RC terms, to "graduate" from Purgatory to Heaven.

Alternatively, she is informing him that it's time to stop "reading" and "writing" and get on with the business at hand, to actually come to terms with the "stuff" he has avoided/evaded/elided.

A depressing alternate interpretation: He can't deal with these things, and will not achieve peace at all (the "stagnation" model -- not at all beyond the man who chose the "do-nothing future" for his masterwork).

This matters a great deal to me -- if we've got the meaning of the opening line "settled," I want to feel equally confident that we have some idea about the close. I still think that the appointment note nailed to the desk, the intercom, and the other details of the last para all add up to **something**. But I'm not at all clear on **what**.

Mantis expressed this concern:

... a straight-line, non-ambiguous reading disposes of most of the novel: it reduces it to a single reading, which, while I agree that the reading is supported by text and interviews, is still ... stunted, truncated, over-simplified ...

I don't see that giving the frame story a clear (even linear) reading reduces the whole novel to that. This is "the story of Weer telling Weer's story," which by its very nature is going to be twisted and convoluted, and probably ambiguous and possibly self-contradictory.

But the puzzles -- the real puzzles; I get the impression from these various interviews that Wolfe is himself a bit puzzled that anyone would consider the time of narration a puzzle -- are in the story Weer tells, not the story of Weer telling it.

Clarifying the time-and-place of his telling may help wrap them in a context, making the puzzles and (hypothetical) solutions more "meaningful" (i.e., why are these the incidents he chooses to narrate, out of a long life?), but I don't think it simplifies them any.

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Alex David Groce — 19 Oct 2000, 16:25 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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Fabulous work on PEACE!

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Also, on the more general topics: a unified list would be fine with me. Ads won't bother me much, although if the mail suddenly becomes HTMLified crap, I will probably just read the online archives if they exist, since I, like any red-blooded computer science grad student, read my mail directly from the command line with UNIX mh.

And, of course, vast kudos and thanks to Ranjit for the list.

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

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Adam Stephanides — 28 Oct 2000, 00:53 · follows Alex David Groce

I keep meaning to post my reactions to the Doctors-as-guides theory, but never getting around to it. Maybe tomorrow. (But as long as I'm on the subject, why did Wolfe put in the visit to Dr. Black? Dr. Black doesn't elicit any memories; we do get mantis's Liberty clue, but that could have been stuck in elsewhere, as could Weer's excursion into metaphysics. The only thing in Weer's visit to Black that couldn't have been put in elsewhere, as far as I can tell, is his unforgivable tactlessness (even to a figment of his imagination). Maybe that's the point.)

For now, just a few quick comments/queries on Dan'I's original post.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

The book is oddly full of evasions about death. Weer almost never mentions the deaths of anyone in the book -- the only deaths I recall being stated openly are Bobby Black's and Sherry Gold's

I'm not sure what you mean here; Weer frequently, even obsessively, talks about people being dead. If you're drawing a distinction between saying that a character "is dead" and describing their death, there's still Olivia, Doris, and the coldroom victim; and I don't remember Sherry's death being described.

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of his way to make Sherry the instigator of everything between them,

I'm not so sure about this. The sequence of events is:

- 1) Weer notices Sherry's hand moving toward the waistband of her skirt.
- 2) Sherry asks Weer, "'You're not going to the _police_?'"
- 3) "To see what she would say," Weer tells her that he's going to track down her father's victims.
- 4) Sherry offers herself.

Weer may not consciously intend sexual blackmail, but he's at least toying with Sherry rather sadistically; and the giveaway phrase, "to see what she would say," is supplied quite freely by Weer himself.

and of her death, he says only that she killed herself.)

Do you have a reference for this? I don't recall this at all, and I just reread the book.

As for the last page -- there is the odd detail about the appointment note nailed to the desk (see the beginning of part 5 to see why this is odd)

I'm not sure what part of the beginning of part 5 you're referring to. In any case, the significance of the appointment note being nailed to the desk is that he is now in his "memory

office," as I said in an earlier post. (And, I would argue, since it's very unlikely that that particular note was included by the architect in the "stage properties," its presence shows that he is not in his real memory office, if one exists, but inside his own skull.)

On a more positive note, I want to thank everyone who's participated in this discussion; I've learned a lot from everybody's posts. If I sometimes seem overcritical, it's just my eagerness to understand this brilliant, maddening book.

--Adam