

PEACE: What went wrong?

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 25 Oct 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 25 Oct 2000, 23:38

Stimulated by the mantis-inspired discussion of PEACE, I just finished rereading it again, taking notes this time. What a great book. I can't believe it's so unknown out of sf circles (my copy was in storage, so I had to check out my university library's copy. In a university of 30,000 students, I'm the first to check it out in five years. Sigh...)

I feel like with this reading I've begun to understand the book, though much of it is still enigmatic to me. In particular, I think I may have an explanation of perhaps the chief mystery: why Weer selects these particular episodes for his narration. We think of the book as being Weer's life story, and to be sure it is that; but most of what one would expect to be narrated in a memoir or autobiography is mentioned only in passing or not at all, while most of parts two and three--making up nearly half the book--are devoted to incidents that appear to involve Weer tangentially at best. Why? What makes these episodes significant for Weer? Of course, all the theories that have been propounded on the book have their own answer to this question. Right now, though, rather than discuss these other theories, I'll just plunge ahead with my own.

The key, I think, is Weer's statement "What went wrong? That is the question" (215; all references are to the Harper first edition. Its pages run from 1 to 264, which may help those with other editions.) In context, Weer is referring to his failure to marry Margaret Lorn. We may add to things that "went wrong" with Weer's life his failure to marry, or (as far as we know) have a long-term relationship with anyone, and his feeling useless in his job as president of Julius's company. (This latter is the significance of the passage Dan'l Danehy-Oakes quotes: "when my life was over and I had come to my desk" (17); not that his life literally ended at that point, but that his useful life was over. See also his remarks to Dan French on p. 250.) But what do these have to do with the episodes which occupy most of the book? I'll begin my answer with a discussion of a story mantis hasn't gotten to yet, that of Jack and the banshee, which Kate told Hannah and Hannah tells young Den. The story is intriguing in itself, so I'll digress a bit, but I'll get back to my main theme soon.

This story stands out in a number of ways. It is the first embedded story. It is one of the few to be finished (though not the only one). It is one of a "Doherty cycle" of stories, the other two of which are the story of St. Brandon and the story of the sidhe, which are distinctive in several ways. And it is, as far as I can remember, the only story in the book whose teller explicitly appends a moral: "'You see, it's not always well to make someone say what they don't want to.'" (36) While Hannah banally applies this moral to rebuke Den for a small joke he played on her, it is rich with meaning for the book as a whole. For in a sense, Weer is "making someone say something" throughout the book. This is apparent in the scenes in Van Ness's office, but it's true of the "memories" as well; for it slowly becomes clear that Weer is not merely recollecting these scenes, but reliving them, altering them as he does so. So there is the suggestion that Weer's whole enterprise is a bit sinister. This ties in with Gold's warning against necromancy (232). We think of Weer as being like the lich who was raised, but from Weer's point of view he is the one practicing necromancy--he tells us over and over that all the people he knew are dead.

But the dangers of making, or trying to make, someone say what they don't want to are illustrated much more dramatically much closer to where the story appears: in the fight with Bobby Black. Bobby "know[s] that if we can make me speak his battle is won" (8); and presumably, though Weer doesn't say so, the five-year-old Den sought to make Bobby cry uncle. So, just as in the story, we have two antagonists, each trying to make the other speak. Like the banshee, Bobby dies. And Weer and Jack's fates are remarkably similar, too. Weer inherits wealth, and never marries. Jack inherits Molly's father's farm, and marries Molly but apparently never sleeps with her; we are left to infer that his life was as unhappy as Weer's. (We might note, incidentally, that Jack, perhaps like Weer, is responsible for two deaths.)

Jack never sleeps with Molly because he was cursed: the banshee told him he would be the father of the Antichrist. Is Weer cursed as a result of the battle? I think he is, though not in a supernatural sense. I don't believe that Weer "murdered" Bobby; the injury was most likely an accident, and besides Den was only five. But when Bobby died, young Den must have felt himself to be a murderer. And the response of his parents, in essence to abandon him, could only have confirmed this belief. Unconsciously regarding himself as a murderer, I would argue, he felt himself both undeserving of love and too much of a potential danger to marry, and so unconsciously sabotaged any chances of marrying.

What of parts two, three, and four? In part two Den meets Margaret, of course; but more to the point, as I argued earlier, we see Olivia exploiting her suitors for her own advantage. This would give Weer another reason for avoiding marriage. Part three, dominated by Julius's story, is the prelude to Julius's marrying Olivia, which leads to Weer's inheriting the company and the end of his useful life. And if mantis is correct that Den's retelling Julius's story to Margaret led to the breakup, then we have another "wrong turning." In part four we see Den's relationship with Lois, which could have led to marriage, collapse in the worst way, one which could only have confirmed the bad impression of women he got from Olivia.

And part five? If you believe that Weer was the one who didn't let the boy out of the coldroom (and I have to admit it seems probable), then Weer's unconscious has further ammunition for its view of Weer as murderer. But beyond this, as mantis says, in part five we see Weer summing up what his life has become, the end result of parts one through four.

It's late, so I'll stop for now. I'll admit my theory is still pretty sketchy, and is far from making the book crystal-clear; but I still like it better than anything else I've seen. Obviously, any comments are greatly appreciated.

--Adam

Michael Andre-Driussi — 25 Oct 2000, 21:36 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam wrote:

We think of Weer as being like the lich who was raised, but from Weer's point of view he is the one practicing necromancy--he tells us over and over that all the people he knew are dead.

I agree with this very much--one mode of Den I've been toying with is "King of the necropolis"; that he is, in some way, at some level, re-animating the dead around him, to ask them questions, to try and force answers from them. (This moves away from solipsism.)

Like those pagan judges in Hades; in the same way, Den became "lord" of the city, and as such he is lord of the local dead (even though he thinks of himself as the Last Man/necromancer).

(All very much shades of small scale Severian.)

But to put another twist on it: there's a metafictional thread which some do not see. For example, that part where the woman, is it Hannah or the Old Kate? Anyway, she's telling the story to little boy Den and she remarks about the "other" person standing there in the room. Now I have always loved that part, because I thought it was the woman seeing =the reader=; and I've seen comments by others who seem to have thought the same thing, so I felt that was another given (like "Den is dead"). But then I found a person or two who believe the "other" in this case is just adult Den, re-seeing the scene . . . for me, this seems to violate some sort of rule about one spirit (that is, if Den is there at all he is either the boy or the adult, not both--it would have come in handy in the interview with Doctor Black, for instance).

Anyway, part of Gold's talk on books suggests that there is something to be feared about mass-market editions of THE NECRONOMICON--that enough people doing this sort of thing could make the world scary. This is implied lightly, almost as a joke, iirc, and it offers yet another case of "what went wrong" in the country beyond Den's memory mansion (Great Cthulhu woke up, or whatever).

And yet, PEACE contains that bit of necromantic spell; PEACE was mass-marketed. And in the end, when Olivia says her famous phrase, it is
=we= who stop reading.

That is to say: we are the archaeologists digging up Den's skull, we are the necromancers drawing his spirit forth to speak. The book itself is the fitting tomb of such a bookish fellow as Den.

(Ah, to compare and contrast PEACE with ENGINE SUMMER, that could be a fine thing.)

=mantis=

Alex David Groce — 26 Oct 2000, 00:34 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi
mantis' latest insight snipped.

This fits in nicely with the possible setting of Den's narration in the far future. Not only can the figure listening to Hannah's story be the reader, but the lich that dead Den and dead Gold are summoning is the long-dead reader. ENGINE SUMMER is an excellent comparison--however, again, I think that Den is NOT one of Wolfe's damned and trapped narrators (Number Five, etc.), while ENGINE SUMMER has a profound atmosphere of imprisonment, in my mind.

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

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