

PEACE: Doctors as spirit guides?

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 29 Oct 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 29 Oct 2000, 21:28

Dan's theory that "Dr. Van Ness, not at all a creation of W's memory/imagination, is a psychopomp, guiding Weer in some way to (if not through) the memories he must deal with" is an interesting one, but I disagree, on both internal and external grounds. For external evidence, we have this passage from James Jordan's interview:

"Why didn't you just write it as an old man thinking over his life. What added dimension is there to it that caused you to want to make it a man who is already dead thinking over his life? GW: Because I wanted it to lend to the memories certain supernatural strengths that ordinary memories that the old man thinking over his life wouldn't have. I wanted to do the rooms that were recreations and rooms that he had known as a very young man and I didn't think that anybody would actually do that. That it had to be a supernatural stick or a mental quirk or something of that sort. I wanted some interplay between the remembered figures and the present reality. And so on that I could not have gotten with just reminiscence."

This answer is not incredibly clear (I would say he's referring to how Weer relives rather than just recalls his past), but if the "real" plot of the book involved Weer's being guided through his memories by spiritual entities, then I think Wolfe would either have said so or evaded the question altogether. And I'm enough of an intentionalist to think that if Wolfe didn't intend the doctors to be spirit guides, they aren't spirit guides.

As far as internal evidence goes, I don't see much indication that Dr. Van Ness actually plays the role Dan'I assigns him. The only things with the possible intent of evoking memories are showing Weer the TAT cards. And these cards don't seem designed to evoke those memories which bar Weer's soul from peace. At any rate, the first card doesn't evoke such a memory, as far as I can tell. And while the memories evoked by the second card do make Weer uneasy, the card itself (at least going by Weer's description of it) is too non-specific to say that Van Ness intended to evoke that memory. (Has anybody looked into whether the cards Weer sees are actual TAT cards? If so, what do they actually show?)

Dan'I has quoted passages in which Van Ness appears to act independently of Weer's will; but I don't think they're inconsistent with Weer having conjured up Van Ness. Authors sometimes say that their characters have "wills of their own," and refuse to follow their author's plans (I'm talking about real authors, not metafictional devices like "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story"); I think Van Ness's "autonomy" should be taken in this sense. And the more likely explanation for Van Ness's failure to react to Weer's report of Sherry's death (also cited by Dan'I as evidence) is that Van Ness (as Weer imagines him) doesn't believe Weer's story.

--Adam