

PEACE: a poor man at forty

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 08 Nov 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 08 Nov 2000, 11:14

Describing the unanticipated course of his life, Weer says: "I found myself instead a poor man at forty, and a very rich one at fifty; and never found Margaret at all." (216, Harper & Row) How Weer got to be rich at fifty seems pretty clear, and some of us have speculated on why he never married Margaret. But Weer, iirc, never discusses why he was "a poor man at forty," and I don't think it's ever been discussed here. It seems to me worth pondering, especially since it bears upon two other matters which are important to Weer but which he says very little about--his parents and his career as an engineer.

In the preceding paragraph, Weer describes the life he should have led: he would "enjoy a career that, if not brilliant, would at least be locally distinguished. I would inherit, between the ages of twenty and thirty, my father's estate, an inheritance that would not make me really wealthy, but that, added to what I earned myself, would give Margaret and me a comfortable position in life. None of this happened..."

Weer did inherit his parents' house, though perhaps not between the ages of twenty and thirty; did he only inherit the house and not the rest of the estate for some reason? Or was the estate not enough to lift him out of poverty (perhaps because his parents spent most of it travelling in Europe)?

And apparently Weer's career as an engineer, though evidently important to him, was not "locally distinguished." It could not have been distinguished within the company either, if, as a veteran engineer with over a decade and a half of experience (according to both Roy Lackey and mantis's time schemes) working for a prosperous company, his salary still didn't lift him out of poverty.

It's clear, at any rate, that besides the disappointments Weer dwells upon, he has suffered other disappointments which he says little about, perhaps because they are among the things he finds it too painful to write about.

--Adam

Roy C. Lackey — 09 Nov 2000, 00:30 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam asked about Weer's family fortunes and, again, I had a piece more or less prepared that touches on the subject, and a few more things as well, so I may as well post it now. It repeats some of what Adam posted, but I'm too lazy to change it.

Mantis has speculated that the rift between Den and Margaret occurred when they were in high school, when he told her the Tilly tale. That, of course, is speculation, because we don't really know what happened between them, because Den doesn't tell us. Dan'I has speculated that what Den doesn't tell us, but only hints at, is important to him, but too painful for him to think about, and Adam has noted that much of the middle of the book has very little to do with Den. So we are reduced to reading between the lines and to sifting the embedded tales for their

possible relevance to Den's life, which, as both Adam and Dan'l noted, we learn very little about.

So what, exactly, did go wrong? Den didn't marry Margaret. He didn't inherit his father's estate when he expected to, between the ages of 20 and 30, or, if he did inherit then, the estate was so much reduced from its former wealth that he couldn't quit his job at the plant. Where the money went is no mystery; it was lost to the Depression, when the farms that were the backbone of the Weer fortunes failed and rent money stopped coming in and the farms were sold "for a song". We don't know when Della died, but it was before Den was 40, and his father died before his mother. When he sold his family's house there was nothing else left of the Weer family fortunes. That's part of the answer to what went wrong, but not all of it. Where else to look?

Why didn't he marry Margaret? Did he scare her off with the Tilly story, as Mantis has suggested? Possibly, but that answer leaves me dissatisfied; there had to be more to it. The corpus of Wolfe's work has a marked tendency to portray women as sluts and moneygrubbers, and PEACE is no exception. Olivia, Lois, Sherry--all guilty of one or both. I don't know if Margaret was a slut or not, but the stock market crash would have occurred when Den was a sophomore in high school, and the Weer fortunes would have been much reduced by the time he was in college. That sort of thing can't be kept secret in a small town, so Margaret would have known about it. It could be that simple; she was looking for someone with a bigger bank book--and she found her Price.

But being, like most men, at heart a hopeless romantic, that answer, too, leaves me dissatisfied, which brings me to where I didn't really want to go, back to the coldhouse. If Den was the irresponsible party who let that 18 year old kid die--and, like it or not, I don't see the point of including that segment if he wasn't--then, unlike the case of Bobby Black, he was morally culpable. He was too old to excuse his behavior. The company may have tried to cover it up, and was successful enough to quash criminal charges and perhaps a concomitant civil suit (or maybe they paid off the kid's family; who knows?), but too many people knew about it to keep it a secret, especially since the plant was probably, even then, the town's largest employer. Again, one way or another, Margaret would have known about it. That's not the kind of man a woman wants to marry or to father her children.

Mantis has linked the "ben Yahya and the Marid" story with its 30 years of selfless service to Den and the coldhouse prank. I can't think of any better reason for Den to stay as long as he did in a dead-end job. It was the price Smart demanded of him for hushing up the coldhouse prank and keeping his job during the Depression. Den's reward for all those years of selfless service was that after the specified time was over (Smart's lifespan), he would inherit the company. When Ron asked Den if he would inherit Smart's wealth, Den didn't really answer the question, just stated that Smart hadn't even spoken to him for 25 years and asked rhetorically if he looked like a "fair-haired boy" (158). I submit that he did know he would inherit Smart's business. While describing building his fancy house, he wrote "when the company at last came into my hands" (35). That phrase "at last" certainly sounds to me as if he had reason to anticipate acquiring the company.

Roy