

# PEACE: is Weer's biography knowable? (long)

The Urth list — 9 messages, 5 voices, 03 Dec 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 03 Dec 2000, 12:35

This is something I've been meaning to post for a couple of weeks; i.e., it was conceived before the recent valuable posts by mantis and Roy taking a broader view, so it doesn't respond directly to them. Also, please forgive any rough edges; due to my own procrastination, this has taken a lot longer to finish than I'd expected, so I want to get it out before everyone forgets the discussion.

I'll be taking a skeptical view of PEACE interpretation (I originally planned to call this "more nihilism to bring everybody down" <g>), so I want to start by again thanking everyone who has participated in the PEACE thread so far. I've learned an enormous amount about the book, both from others' posts and from the close reading of the book that the discussion inspired me to undertake. And I hope that others have learned something from my posts as well.

That said, PEACE has not become more comprehensible to me as a result of this discussion. On the contrary, it has made me realize that understanding the book is far more difficult than I had thought. In particular, I've become quite pessimistic about the possibility of producing a "biography" of Weer grounded in the text. There are two basic roadblocks in the way of all such efforts. First, the explicit information we are given about Weer's life, or the information that can be deduced with certainty, leaves unanswered many crucial questions about Weer's life. Again and again Wolfe teases us by making clear that some aspect of Weer's past, such as his relationship with his father or his breakup with Margaret, is important to him, but giving no further information about this aspect. Compounding this problem, despite Weer's articulateness, it is very difficult to get from his narration a sense of his personality, as someone pointed out here once (apologies to whoever it is).

The second obstacle is that, unlike in 5HC, we have no independent source of information aside from Weer's narrative, so once we accept the probability that Weer is unreliable about past events as well as his present situation we have no way of comparing Weer's account with any more reliable data. Conventionally, when reading fiction we assume that the narrator is truthful and accurate, far more so than any real-life narrator could be about long-ago events. Wolfe plays with this convention in several works. In PEACE, he throws it out entirely; but he doesn't replace it with any other source of guidance. To make matters worse, it is not even clear what status Weer is claiming for the "past" sections of the text. To what extent is he recollecting the past and to what extent is he reliving it? In one post, mantis remarked that a proposed interpretation violated "the rules of the game," or words to that effect. But there are no rules governing the relationship of Weer's account to the truth, at least none that we can know of.

Due to these obstacles, all interpretations of the book (including mine) which see Weer as unreliable reject certain of his statements while placing great emphasis on others, based on completely subjective criteria. To take an example, which will hopefully not offend anyone since it's a thesis that I've endorsed, consider the proposition that Weer was responsible for the death of the worker in the coldhouse prank. There are three possible arguments for this view that I'm aware of:

1. Why does Weer include the story if it only happened to a coworker of Weer's?
2. The vividness of Weer's account of the culprit's emotions suggests firsthand experience.
3. Having Weer be the culprit fits in with various broader hypotheses about Weer's life.

These arguments are not conclusive, either singly or together. As to the first argument, there are other stories whose inclusion is, on the surface, equally inexplicable, and we don't explain these by saying that they really happened to Weer. It would be easy to give a thematic or metaphoric interpretation of the coldhouse prank story, similar to the interpretations we give for these other stories. As to the second argument, we know Weer is both imaginative and a gifted storyteller; and his description of the terror of being alone in the factory at night could be based on his own experience without his being the culprit of the story. And as to the third point, the broader hypotheses into which Weer's being the culprit fit are, with no disrespect meant, even more speculative.

Furthermore, there are cogent arguments against Weer's being the culprit (which I won't go into now, because that's not my point). If, despite all this, I favor the hypothesis that Weer is the culprit, it's because I feel that *PEACE* is a more coherent book when read that way. But this is a matter of taste; if someone were to say that to them *PEACE* was more coherent if Weer's narrative were taken as truthful in this case, I would not be able to argue them out of it.

Not only are all attempts to go beyond the snippets of biography that Weer himself gives us subjective; there are certain assumptions which almost everyone takes for granted in these attempts, but which cannot be shown to be true from the text. Take Weer's "astral visit" to Van Ness. While one is tempted to take the non-anachronistic parts of this visit to reflect a real visit, mantis has shown that there are difficulties in such a reading, which leads him to posit that Weer is conflating two real visits. But even this may be assuming too much. Weer's narration of the start of the visit has, to me, a dreamlike quality, and it seems to me that the entire visit, not just the interview with Van Ness, may be a fabrication of Weer's: he undoubtedly did see Van Ness when alive, but there may never have been a visit in which he sat in the waiting room while Margaret read *Life* and Sherry whispered to Ted, or where Weer searched in his pants pockets for his jackknife before remembering he no longer carried it. In any case, we cannot prove from the text that these events ever took place; as stated above, the relationship between Weer's narrative and his actual past is undetermined by the text.

Similarly, I once argued that the "day in the life of the president" in chapter five was not a real day in Weer's past, but a fabrication by Weer of the same type as his visit to Van Ness, conflating events that happened on various days or never happened. There were no responses to my post, either positive or negative, but again you can't prove from the text that my hypothesis is false.

Finally, there is the question of Weer's memory, which Roy recently raised. Weer tells us more than once that his memory is fallible, as, of course, everyone's is. But we tend to discount these statements and assume that when Weer is inaccurate it's because he is consciously or unconsciously suppressing something. Again, this assumption cannot be justified by the text (only by the reading convention I mentioned above, which Wolfe implicitly rejects). To take a concrete example, Blaine's account of the "Chinese egg" affair is quite different from Weer's and we assume that this demonstrates the inaccuracy of Blaine's memory. But as Roy has pointed out, there are no grounds for this assumption. Blaine may be right and Weer wrong, or both may be equally wrong.

These assumptions can be justified on the basis that without them, it is impossible to reconstruct Weer's biography. But did Wolfe intend us to be able to reconstruct Weer's

biography? Much of the interpretation of PEACE (including mine) seems to proceed on the assumption that Wolfe hid clues within the text which, if dug up and interpreted properly, will yield Weer's true biography. But a great deal of interpretive effort and ingenuity has been expended on PEACE and, while several plausible "biographies" have been produced, I don't find any of them to be sufficiently grounded in the text, or to yield a convincing enough reading of the book as a whole, for me to accept as Weer's true biography, or as what Wolfe intended. Of course, it's still early days; it may be that somebody will find convincing evidence in the text that has been overlooked or misinterpreted up to now. But it seems just as possible to me that Wolfe intended the book as a trap for the reader who would be lured into trying to construct Weer's biography, hunting for answers that aren't there and seeking definitiveness where there is only ambiguity. The quote I cited earlier, about Weer trying to arrange the Lifes in chronological order and failing, seems to suggest this. It may also be the case that Wolfe did have a "true" biography in mind, but failed to provide unambiguous indications of this, for whatever reason.

I could say more, but I think I'd better stop and post this already. As usual, comments are appreciated.

--Adam

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 03 Dec 2000, 09:28 · follows Adam Stephanides

Good post, Adam! I especially like the idea that A.D. Weer was not involved in the coldhouse prank--in effect, that this is just another "ghost story" within yet another genre framework (journalistic what-have-you), and as such, if it =does= relate to Weer it is in the same way that any of the fairy tales do. So (for Weer; for the deeper story) it is about Bobby Black again, rather than a mysterious other.

OTOH Adam wrote these reasons implicating Weer in the prank:

1. Why does Weer include the story if it only happened to a coworker of Weer's?
2. The vividness of Weer's account of the culprit's emotions suggests firsthand experience.
3. Having Weer be the culprit fits in with various broader hypotheses about Weer's life.

To which I'd add one that to me seems like it should be number one in ranking: Weer seems very agitated by the story, to the point where he might be on the verge of a medical crisis (in fact, on the verge of his final medical crisis). Freed of literally casting him as a multiple murderer, we can easily chalk this up to unresolved guilt over Bobby Black.

In fact, you could even put a Freudian ("childhood makes the person") spin on the whole deal and say that Weer's real biography ends with his childhood, and all the rest, the dreams of a life lived, books read, and so on, is all just a belated attempt to resolve these traumas. So instead of trying to hammer out his life from 15 to 60, and then trace things from the fictitious to the biographical, instead use only his life from 1 to 15 (or whatever: Freud's deal was 1 to 7, iirc), from which everything else phantasmagorically emerges (with no distinction between fiction and biography). Wave upon wave of reiteration. Such an approach seems quite easy at first glance, since there doesn't seem to be much argument about that stretch of Den's life.

Adam wrote:

Similarly, I once argued that the "day in the life of the president" in chapter five was not a real day in Weer's past, but a fabrication by Weer of the same type as his visit to Van Ness, conflating events that happened on various days or never happened. There were no responses to

my post, either positive or negative, but again you can't prove from the text that my hypothesis is false.

Well Roy Lackey and I were using something like this as a working model, but then since there seems to be a considerable gap between the day of Three Visitors ("early presidency") and the Day of the Reporter ("late presidency"), it seemed to resolve into two different days: the day of omen, and the day of death.

They could still be fabrications.

And nine-year-old Den might still be passed out beside his chemistry set!

=mantis=

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William Ansley — 03 Dec 2000, 23:03 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

At 12:35 PM -0800 12/3/00, Adam Stephanides wrote:

But it seems just as

possible to me that Wolfe intended the book as a trap for the reader who would be lured into trying to construct Weer's biography, hunting for answers that aren't there and seeking definitiveness where there is only ambiguity. The quote I cited earlier, about Weer trying to arrange the \_Life\_s in chronological order and failing, seems to suggest this. It may also be the case that Wolfe did have a "true" biography in mind, but failed to provide unambiguous indications of this, for whatever reason.

I agree that Wolfe probably didn't intend the reader to be able to reconstruct a biography of Weer from \_Peace\_. I love the idea that Weer's failure to be able to sort out "Life"s in chronological order is a clue that this is the case. It does seem like something Wolfe would do.

Right now, I feel that the word "trap" is a trifle strong, but I have accused Wolfe of worse things, after various bout of frustration brought on by trying to figure out various of his works.

William Ansley

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Michael Straight — 04 Dec 2000, 09:29 · follows William Ansley

On Sun, 3 Dec 2000, Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

In fact, you could even put a Freudian ("childhood makes the person") spin on the whole deal and say that Weer's real biography ends with his childhood, and all the rest, the dreams of a life lived, books read, and so on, is all just a belated attempt to resolve these traumas. So instead of trying to hammer out his life from 15 to 60, and then trace things from the fictitious to the biographical, instead use only his life from 1 to 15 (or whatever: Freud's deal was 1 to 7, iirc), from which everything else phantasmagorically emerges (with no distinction between fiction and biography). Wave upon wave of reiteration. Such an approach seems quite easy at first glance, since there doesn't seem to be much argument about that stretch of Den's life.

[...]

And nine-year-old Den might still be passed out beside his chemistry set!

No, he's fallen asleep on a ceramic pillow! And and his Aunt is waking him up to go play at the picnic with Bobby Blake...

-Rostrum

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 04 Dec 2000, 10:15 · follows Michael Straight

A Monday morning meditation inspired by Adam's post and the various replies thereunto. I may ramble.

I'm inclined to agree with & even to insist upon the following basic points:

1. That Gene Wolfe did in fact have a "real" and (more or less) coherent biography of ADW in mind when he wrote PEACE;
2. That PEACE does not give us the clues to accurately, reliably, and consistently reconstruct that biography.

On the cover of my (oldish, trade pb) copy of 5HC, there's a quote from Ursula K. Le Guin describing the contents as (quoted from memory and probably wrong except in gist) an example in writing of the uncertainty principle. I would say that PEACE far more deserves this.

The question is, assuming that all this uncertainty is not arbitrary (which would by implication predicate of its author a kind of meanness vis-a-vis his readers that I simply do not see as likely in the case of GW), what kind

of readerly (rather than writerly) model can we build that accounts for it? In other words: How does or would Wolfe's ideal reader imagine (image-in) PEACE?

Adam wrote, "PEACE has not become more comprehensible to me as a result of this discussion. On the contrary, it has made me realize that understanding the book is far more difficult than I had thought." While I agree with him at a certain level, I suggest that the level is one which uses an impoverished -- or, rather, insufficiently enriched -- meaning for the word "comprehensible."

First, I suggest that the uncertainty must make sense at a higher level, that it must in fact follow deterministic (at least statistically deterministic) rules, which are if not discoverable at least deductible.

Second, I suggest that the book contains everything necessary for a useful reading. This is important; it is, I think, the difference between calling Wolfe a sadistic and manipulative writer and calling him a tricky but skilled and fair writer. This is, incidentally, analogous to a fundamental principle for Catholic readings of the Bible -- the Catholic take is that the canonical Scriptures "contain faithfully everything which God wants us to know for our salvation." That is, it contains all that is necessary, and these necessary things are discoverable and comprehensible, but does not mean that all of Scripture is literally factual. If we find, in our reading of Scripture, that it contradicts itself or the physical-factual world, then we may reasonably conclude that our reading is itself flawed -- most probably because it attempts to answer the wrong questions. Thus, for example, most Catholic "Bible scholars" will say that the book of Job does not consist of biographical facts about a real man named Job, but that the book is nonetheless true -- in fact it is a theodicy, an extended meditation

on the problem of evil, among other things.

Wolfe, a very convinced Catholic convert, may reasonably be expected to take

a similar view toward his writings. (Remember; "Scripture" literally means "that which is written." All written works are at root Scriptural; all writings read properly reveal or even betray truth about him or her who writes them.) Again, where we find uncertainty and/or contradiction,

we are probably reading in a way that asks the text the wrong questions.

Returning to Adam's original post, I find this nugget: "it is not even clear

what status Weer is claiming for the 'past' sections of the text. To what extent is he recollecting the past and to what extent is he reliving it?"

Three points.

First, I think we may immediately conclude that we are not expected to discover a (single/consistent/reliable) status for "the 'past' sections." "What is the status of the 'past' sections" is not among the most useful questions to ask.

Second, I think the word "past" clearly does belong in quotes, as Adam puts them, because it assumes a linearity of time. More on this later.

Second, Adam left out at least two other possibilities.

1. Recollecting the past.
2. Reliving the past.
3. Recreating the past.
4. Lying about the past.

Further, the boundaries between these are rather hazy, forming a continuum rather than four distinct possibilities. I take these as working definitions: "Recollecting" the past means attempting in memory to recall the facts, actions, and details of a single "real" past as accurately as possible. "Reliving" means travelling in some sense to the past and passing through those moments again. "Recreating" the past means moving into past moments and changing their events. And lying about the past is the direct contrary of "recollecting."

The idea that Den actively lies to us is probably the duller choice.

The idea of straightforward recollection is only slightly more interesting; if this were the general case, we would have very little in the way of mystery.

Indeed, if I could ignore all the ellipses, elisions, and contradictions in Den's story, I would have to conclude that PEACE consisted of the somewhat- incoherent ramblings of a not particularly interesting person.

The idea that he is reliving the past gets more interesting. How? And to what end? (Is it his own idea or is it being "done to" him -- i.e., is he agent or patient?)

"Recreating" is by far the most interesting; it probably covers more mental "territory" than any of the other three, from Den mentally asking himself what would have happened if he had done something differently, to "Purgatory" as a sort of mental "holodeck" where he can actually experiment with such things,

to actually travelling back in time and doing it over. In addition, it may be that the explicit facts, events, and details do not change, but Den's understanding of them changes -- he does the same things but for different reasons, or simply is allowed to observe himself doing them and understand if he can the meaning of what he did and what happened afterward and why.

I particularly like looking at "recreating" the past because it fits in thematically with that damn Chinese pillow story that seems like a minor episode but keeps confronting you everywhere you turn in PEACE.

In summary, then: I think we cannot build a usefully coherent and consistent chronology of Weer's life. I think the book actively forbids it. On the other hand, I think we can build a usefully coherent and consistent model of the book which accounts for the incoherency and inconsistency of Weer's account.

Again and again: PEACE is not the story of Weer's life; it is the story of Weer telling his story.

--Dan'l

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Michael Straight — 04 Dec 2000, 14:09 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Sun, 3 Dec 2000, Adam Stephanides wrote:

Furthermore, there are cogent arguments against Weer's being the culprit (which I won't go into now, because that's not my point). If, despite all this, I favor the hypothesis that Weer is the culprit, it's because I feel that PEACE is a more coherent book when read that way. But this is a matter of taste; if someone were to say that to them PEACE was more coherent if Weer's narrative were taken as truthful in this case, I would not be able to argue them out of it.

You see this as if it were a negative thing, but I think this is the most interesting way to talk about a book. If PEACE is a more coherent book and more aesthetically satisfying if you conclude that Weer is the culprit, then evidence to the contrary amounts to an artistic mistake on Wolfe's part.

You say that this amounts to a matter of taste and we can't argue about that. But we do. One of the more interesting discussions on this list was when someone expressed dislike for the Long Sun books and others left in to defend them and to describe what they liked, what they thought the books did well. Whether or not they were able to argue that person out of their opinion, they gave me an opportunity to notice and appreciate aspects of the books I'd missed the first time.

The first time I read Urth of the New Sun, I hated the idea that Severian himself was the Concilator and disliked the book. But after reading other people's comments on the series, I see things I had missed that makes it all fit together much better and my opinion of the book has changed.

I'm somewhat interested in finding out what Wolfe meant, but only as one of various means to the end of helping me get the most enjoyment out of his books. (This ain't law or scripture - I'm not reading Wolfe to try to figure out what exactly two contracted parties had agreed to or to figure out how God wants me to live - this is just for fun!) So, for me, the best reading of PEACE is the one that I find most aesthetically satisfying. Coherence is an important part of that, but I'm not above setting aside this or that bit of evidence if it means I can better enjoy the whole.

-Rostrum

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Adam Stephanides — 05 Dec 2000, 13:30 · follows Michael Straight

Thanks for the thoughtful response; I'll do my best to reply in kind.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

I'm inclined to agree with & even to insist upon the following basic points:

1. That Gene Wolfe did in fact have a "real" and (more or less) coherent biography of ADW in mind when he wrote PEACE;

I agree that Wolfe had something definite in mind; whether it was a coherent biography of Weer, or a collection of deliberately fragmentary or inconsistent biographical "facts" I don't know.

2. That PEACE does not give us the clues to accurately, reliably, and consistently reconstruct that biography.

On the cover of my (oldish, trade pb) copy of 5HC, there's a quote from Ursula K. Le Guin describing the contents as (quoted from memory and probably wrong except in gist) an example in writing of the uncertainty principle. I would say that PEACE far more deserves this.

The question is, assuming that all this uncertainty is not arbitrary (which would by implication predicate of its author a kind of meanness vis-a-vis his readers that I simply do not see as likely in the case of GW)

When I talked about the "trap" of biography, I didn't mean to imply that Wolfe was being pointlessly sadistic (though I'm not as convinced as you of his essential helpfulness; after all, he's written one novel and a number of shorter works which nobody, AFAIK, has yet made any sense of). Wolfe's intent, under this hypothesis, would not be to make the reader endlessly and fruitlessly hunt for clues, but to make a point about the mutability of memory, or the indeterminacy of reading or knowledge.

Adam wrote, "PEACE has not become more comprehensible to me as a result of this discussion. On the contrary, it has made me realize that understanding the book is far more difficult than I had thought." While I agree with him at a certain level, I suggest that the level is one which uses an impoverished -- or, rather, insufficiently enriched -- meaning for the word "comprehensible."

I partially agree with what I think you're saying. I agree that there are aspects of the book which can be "comprehended" apart from Weer's biography, and that we should look at the why and how, not just the what, of Weer's narration much more closely than we've done so far. (I would have said something about this in my earlier post if I hadn't wanted to finally get it out, as I had said.)

But, to jump ahead in your post, I'm skeptical that reading the book as "the story of Weer telling his story" will make it more determinate or comprehensible. On the contrary, it seems only to lead to "confusion worse confounded," at least on the evidence of the discussion here. At least we can put together a basic outline of Weer's life, even if it's missing information on crucial points. But when it comes to Weer's present situation, we can't even agree on the simplest facts: is he alive or dead? If alive, is he young or old? If dead, is he on his way to heaven, resurrection, or neither? To add to the confusion, Weer's description of his present contains far more, and more glaring, anomalies than his account of his past. It's true that (judging by what I've read) less work, in the sense of close reading, has gone into investigating these questions than into investigating Weer's biography, so it's possible that with more work things might clear up.

Second, I suggest that the book contains everything necessary for a useful reading. This is important; it is, I think, the difference between calling Wolfe a sadistic and manipulative writer and calling him a tricky but skilled and fair writer.

There's a third possibility: that Wolfe misjudged what a reader could reasonably be expected to infer. (Some of his statements in interviews suggest that this is sometimes the case. He apparently thought--or at least recalled having thought--that nobody would actually build a house as strange as Weer's "museum house." I don't agree (the Winchester house is a lot stranger), so I didn't make the deductions from Weer's description of his house that Wolfe



expected.)

[Comparison with Catholic Biblical interpretation snipped]

Wolfe, a very convinced Catholic convert, may reasonably be expected to take

a similar view toward his writings. (Remember; "Scripture" literally means "that which is written." All written works are at root Scriptural; all writings read properly reveal or even betray truth about him or her who writes them.) Again, where we find uncertainty and/or contradiction, we are probably reading in a way that asks the text the wrong questions.

Of course, Wolfe is aware that he isn't God (he even wrote a story on the topic), so he would presumably concede that he might have occasionally contradicted himself, or failed to say what he meant to.

Returning to Adam's original post, I find this nugget: "it is not even clear

what status Weer is claiming for the 'past' sections of the text. To what extent is he recollecting the past and to what extent is he reliving it?"

Three points.

First, I think we may immediately conclude that we are not expected to discover a (single/consistent/reliable) status for "the 'past' sections." "What is the status of the 'past' sections" is not among the most useful questions to ask.

If you're saying that the "past" sections don't all have the same status, I agree. If you're saying that it's not useful to ask what the status of any particular "past" section (or portion thereof) is, I disagree (but I don't think you are).

Second, Adam left out at least two other possibilities.

1. Recollecting the past.
2. Reliving the past.
3. Recreating the past.
4. Lying about the past.

Well, I had been illustrating a point, not offering an exhaustive list. But I like your typology.

The idea that Den actively lies to us is probably the dumbest choice.

The idea of straightforward recollection is only slightly more interesting;

if

this were the general case, we would have very little in the way of mystery.

Actually, (setting aside the other two possibilities on your list for a moment), Weer is almost certainly neither 100% lying nor 100% "straightforwardly recollecting." Instead, his narrative is a combination of recollection, suppression, and (perhaps) lying that is nearly impossible to disentangle. So I don't agree that we have "very little in the way of mystery."

Indeed, if I could ignore all the ellipses, elisions, and contradictions in Den's story

I certainly wouldn't ignore these, but we don't need Weer's "reliving" or "recreating" to account for them, although there are other reasons why Weer has to be "recreating at least to some extent.

I would have to conclude that PEACE consisted of the somewhat-incoherent ramblings of a not particularly interesting person.

Heh. Except for the "not particularly interesting" bit, that's a pretty good description.

"Recreating" is by far the most interesting; it probably covers more mental "territory" than any of the other three, from Den mentally asking himself what would have happened if he had done something differently, to "Purgatory" as a sort of mental "holodeck" where he can actually experiment with such things,

to actually travelling back in time and doing it over. In addition, it may be that the explicit facts, events, and details do not change, but Den's understanding of them changes -- he does the same things but for different reasons, or simply is allowed to observe himself doing them and understand if he can the meaning of what he did and what happened afterward and why.

[snip]

In summary, then: I think we cannot build a usefully coherent and consistent chronology of Weer's life. I think the book actively forbids it. On the other hand, I think we can build a usefully coherent and consistent model of the book which accounts for the incoherency and inconsistency of Weer's account.

I'll have to think more about this idea of "recreating," and I want to get this out while it's fresh. It's clear that it's going on, at least to some extent; there are the occasional intrusions of the present into the "past," and the anomalies that have been pointed out in the doctor's visit and in chapter five. But I'm skeptical that "recreating" can be the master key to building "a coherent and consistent model," as you seem to be suggesting, at least one which is grounded in the text.

--Adam

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Adam Stephanides — 07 Dec 2000, 11:17 · follows Adam Stephanides

Michael Straight wrote:

I'm somewhat interested in finding out what Wolfe meant, but only as one of various means to the end of helping me get the most enjoyment out of his books. (This ain't law or scripture - I'm not reading Wolfe to try to figure out what exactly two contracted parties had agreed to or to figure out how God wants me to live - this is just for fun!) So, for me, the best reading of PEACE is the one that I find most aesthetically satisfying. Coherence is an important part of that, but I'm not above setting aside this or that bit of evidence if it means I can better enjoy the whole.

Without reopening the question of intent (which I may get around to posting on one of these days) I'll say that PEACE, to me, presents itself as having been carefully planned out by Wolfe so that its details and apparent anomalies are part of a conscious design; that is, Wolfe did not write it in a slapdash fashion or by letting his inspiration carry him where it listed. If this is correct, then (unless Wolfe was guilty of a monumental lapse of judgment) it is very unlikely that any "accidentally present" reading I could discern would be more satisfying than the reading Wolfe intended. If PEACE were to turn out not to have been carefully planned in this sense, then I believe I would think less of it: many details which appear significant would in fact be random or careless, and the book would be parading under false pretenses. (Not that I think carefully planned out books are always better; my remarks are specific to PEACE.)

--Adam

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Michael Straight — 07 Dec 2000, 11:43 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Thu, 7 Dec 2000, Adam Stephanides wrote:

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My point was to disagree with your claim that we couldn't evaluate possible readings of PEACE by arguing which reading is aesthetically better. You say the reading Wolfe intended is much more likely to be better than one he didn't intend. Seems to me that implies that if we find a reading that we like the best, that's likely to be the one Wolfe intended, which should make everybody happy.

So, for instance, I think the book is more interesting if it turns out Weer was the one responsible for the warehouse death, but either lies about it in a pretty daring sort of way (reminds me of Hitchcock's movie "Rope") or can't admit to himself what really happened. I don't think it's enough for you to respond saying that reading isn't sufficiently supported by the text. You need to demonstrate how PEACE is a better book if you don't read it that way.

Perhaps you could argue it's more interesting to suspect Weer *might* have been responsible for the warehouse death than to know for sure either way. Which might have a stronger claim to be what Wolfe has actually given us...

-Rostrum