

Making sense of Castlevia

The Urth list — 6 messages, 4 voices, 07 Dec 2000

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Tony Ellis — 07 Dec 2000, 14:48

Adam Stephanides wrote:
after all, he's written one novel and
a number of shorter works which nobody, AFAIK, has yet made any sense
of).

And when questioned, clarified:

CASTLEVIA (I had expected that would be obvious).

Hmm. Anyone else a trifle surprised by Adam's choice? Obviously the book has its fair share of opaque passages, but I had always put the lack of discussion of Castlevia down to its relative straightforwardness.

Tony Ellis
On-line Editor, PC Format magazine
01225 442244 x2349
<http://www.pcformat.co.uk>

Michael Straight — 07 Dec 2000, 10:39 · follows Tony Ellis

On Thu, 7 Dec 2000, Tony Ellis wrote:
Hmm. Anyone else a trifle surprised by Adam's choice? Obviously the book
has its fair share of opaque passages, but I had always put the lack of
discussion of Castlevia down to its relative straightforwardness.

I immediately thought of Castlevia when I read Adam's post.

I'd love to see you're "straightforward" summary of how it ends.

I remember one reviewer writing something like "Gene Wolfe stands at the bridge as the critics come by one by one to try to figure out Castlevia, and all are knocked into the moat." (The reviewer's sentence was much better than that.)

-Rostrum

Tony Ellis — 07 Dec 2000, 18:34 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum said:

I'd love to see you're "straightforward" summary of how it ends.

:-)

I remember one reviewer writing something like "Gene Wolfe stands at
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bridge as the critics come by one by one to try to figure out
Castlevia,
and all are knocked into the moat."

LOL!

No mere summary of mine can hope to create such an amusing mental picture as that, alas.

But surely "how it ends" is just your good old-fashioned pagan fertility ritual, as documented in everything from 'The White Goddess' to 'The Wicker Man'? Winter (old king Geimhreadh) kills the year (the Green Man) so that it can be reborn in the spring. Shields is the fool-hero-king who had to be sacrificed to bring this about.

If it seems confusing, it's because we've approached it through the medium of (mostly) Arthurian mythology. At the last moment the Arthurian battle between 'good and evil' is revealed as the cyclic mystery of the seasons. But there's actually nothing revolutionary in this - the pagan fertility ritual subtext of the Arthurian story 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' has been the subject of a thousand undergraduate Eng. Lit. essays.

Tony Ellis
On-line Editor, PC Format magazine
01225 442244 x2349
<http://www.pcformat.co.uk>

Peter Westlake — 07 Dec 2000, 23:17 · follows Tony Ellis

At 18:34 2000-12-07 +0000, Tony Ellis wrote:

...

But surely "how it ends" is just your good old-fashioned pagan fertility ritual, as documented in everything from 'The White Goddess' to 'The Wicker Man'? Winter (old king Geimhreadh) kills the year (the Green Man) so that it can be reborn in the spring. Shields is the fool-hero-king who had to be sacrificed to bring this about.

Fair enough (I found out that Geimhreadh meant Winter and felt very pleased with myself, though all I did was a web search), and the idea of rebirth explains what that's for nicely. But the details are still somewhat obscure. Is Shields really killed? He does wake up, after all, and there's no mention of him being a ghost or zombie like Jim Long. Admittedly the text does say that the connection between the fairies and the spirits of the dead is obscure.

But what about the rest of the details? Who is Liam Fee, and why does he want to buy the house? Is he really an alien or monster, as he appears to be when Hwan Lee stuns him? At least we know that he killed Tom, and his immediate reason, if not his ultimate motives.

Are Jose Balanco and Hwan (which sounds a lot like "Juan") Lee the equivalent of Balin and Balan? There's the names and the killing of a brother.

Who is Lucie? Why is she pretending to be French, or if she really is French, why does she sound American for a while to Sally? Do we agree that she appears and disappears a lot, and doesn't show up in mirrors? She's afraid of water too, like a cat, and her name, Carabas, is from Puss in Boots. I can't buy Robert Borski's theory that she is the same as G. Gordon Kitty, though!

G. Gordon Kitty is great fun, and one of the most explicable figures. I take him to be just what he seems, Judy's cat transformed by the magic of the fairy realm.

What's all the business with the organ playing in the museum? There are hints in it of trolls, which tells us who took the diary, but why? Why play the music?

Viviane Morgan appears to be Vivian *and* Morgan le Fay. How does she manage to be both?

Does Sally really take up with von Madadh at the end?

How does Mercedes feel about that, if he killed her father?

Von Madadh is King of Hounds or Wolves, and he's the dog that Sally thinks is Remy. But what's he doing? Is he just there to lure everyone to the Castle?

Is all the trouble at Meadow Grass to do with the attempts to kill Wrangler? It all seems rather indirect if so. If not, what is it about?

What is Sally doing in the wagon with the wild horsemen? We see Sissy join them and enter Castlevue, but it isn't clear how Sally comes to be there.

There were probably other questions too, but that's all off the top of my head. Castlevue is one of my favourites, and probably the book of Wolfe's I've read most often, simply because it's very easy to read, makes sense bit by bit (if you see what I mean; it's only when you try to work out why things happen that you realize the simplicity of the style is so deceptive!) and is chock full of unanswered questions. There's also some remarkably good characterisation, which is particularly clever given the almost comic-book surface style. I'm halfway through reading "Idylls of the King", but it hasn't been much help so far :-)

Spectacled Bear.

James Jordan — 07 Dec 2000, 21:56 · follows Peter Westlake

It has been a long time since I read this, but my take on it then was that it was to a large extent about perception. Note the title: Castle VIEW. The same objects are perceived in different contexts at different times by different people: A winnebago is a spaceship is a castle, e.g.. The same people have different names. The situation may be SF one minute, Dracula the next, Arthur the next, Charlemagne the next, something Chinese the next, ancient Egypt the next, etc. (I don't mean all these specifically; I don't recall which I thought were there and which weren't. But you get the idea.)

My thought was that *Castlevue* is not SF or fantasy, but "mainstream," but that the events were being constantly cast/perceived/described in mythic terms, shifting mythic terms. Thus, the key would be to figure out what actually is happening at the everyday-world level, and then explore how these mundane events might be also "participating" in those mythic archetypes which the narrator has superimposed on them. As with the Emerald City (in the Baum book), Wolfe is giving us colored glasses with which we are looking at quite ordinary events, so that the ordinary world becomes a "castle" in this "view." Thus, something ordinary is going on in the "wild ride" sequence, but various people see different "wild rides" going on; one sees cowboys, as I recall.

But I may be COMPLETELY WRONG about this. I've never returned to it for a later reading.

Patera Nutria

Michael Straight — 08 Dec 2000, 14:10 · follows James Jordan

On Thu, 7 Dec 2000, James Jordan wrote:

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As much as I like this idea, I don't think it's the book Wolfe wrote. I've seen a couple interviews with him about it and he always talks about the joke of Morgan seeking an heir of Arthur and it turning out that everyone alive is an heir of Arthur. I'd think if what you suggest is true he would have at least hinted that everyone seems to be missing the real-world mundane thing going on.

-Rostrum