

Free Live Free

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 18 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2589>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

James Jordan — 18 Apr 2001, 11:12

I just re-read Free Live Free, and since this list is dormant, thought I'd toss this out to see if anyone wants to discuss it a bit. Here are some of my thoughts, to start us out:

I do think that the Wonderful Wizard of Oz plays a major role in the book. It's alluded to a number of times. But the narrative is greatly transmogrified. FLF is Wolfe's book about America, and to spring off of this quintessentially American fantasy is very apropos. I've not (yet) re-read WWOz so I'm going by memory here; but:

1. We begin by arriving at a house presided over by a wizard (not a witch, and not a bad person), Ben Free. That house is torn down, and the characters scatter. Compare the beginning of WWOz.
2. At the end we find the Good Witch of the South (Glinda; formerly Madame Serpentina).
3. The movement is from the house, to a hotel (Emerald City), to an insane asylum (abode of the wicked witch of the west), back to the hotel (Emerald City), and then on to High Country (the journey south, where the characters in WWOz are tested), and finally back to the original house (now corresponding to the city of the south).
4. The destruction of the psychiatric witchery of the insane asylum corresponds to the defeat of the wicked witch of the west and her horde of monkeys.
5. Notice that it is while in the hotel the first time (in the Emerald City), that the four receive a communication from the moon via Serpentina about their destinies (compare the wizard's promise in WWOz).

Thus, in a general way the movement of the novel seems to track WWOz. But there are some more general allusions, it seems. For instance, the field of poppies seems to link with the drugging of patients in the asylum, though it is not in the same narrative order as WWOz. Does the encounter with the queen of the mice link with Serpentina's return to the gypsy king just before going to the asylum? I suspect that a re-read of WWOz will show many more parallels. Second, the characters: I suspect that many of the minor characters come from later Oz books, since Wolfe is familiar with them. I'm not interested in reading these to see if this might be the case, however.

The four main characters each have a besetting sin. These seem to link with four of the Seven Deadly Sins (Pride, Greed, Envy, Anger, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth).

Fat Candy - gluttony. That's a no-brainer. (Her name links to this also, of course.)

Ozzie (Osgood = Oz-Good) Barnes (the salesman) - lust. I think his marriage broke up because of unfaithfulness, though this is not stated.

Stubb (the detective) - pride. He thinks he can handle everything, and has a "little man complex" or "Napoleon complex." As a short man consumed by being short, he's a "stub."

Madame Serpentina - witchcraft, perhaps greed as lust for power (the sin of the Serpent, Satan). Also, as a gypsy pickpocket she's "greedy." (Note that her name originally was Marie, Mary, but that she has fallen from this "Christian" name into serving Satan as Madame Serpentina.)

Each is trapped by his/her sin just before being offered a new life. This corresponds to the tests that the characters in WWOz undergo in their journey south in the second half of the book:

Candy by her lust for food and drink by Sweet (note the name: sweet guy and sweet food);

Barnes by his lust for sex at the Flying Carpet cabaret;

Stubb by his pride in thinking he can handle the situation with Cliff (Stubb "falls over the cliff" because he's not careful enough);

Madame Serpentina by her lust for forbidden knowledge and power (symbolized by Egypt, the ancient enemy).

Now, in WWOz the three Oz characters are animal, vegetable, and mineral. I don't know how Wolfe might be playing with this. But they are also mind, emotion, and will.

Stubb - very smart; mind (Scarecrow; vegetable?)

Candy - very loving; emotion (Tin Woodman; mineral?)

Serpentina - very determined; will (Lion; animal?)

Which leaves Barnes as Dorothy, and Little Ozzie as Toto.

And of course Ben Free as the Wizard. Free is not a humbug, but I think he is trapped in "Oz" (see below), and only escapes through death. Free does move upwards (compare the wizard's balloon).

Now, overlaid on this fully American fantasy (WWOz) is Wolfe's reflections on America. America used to be free, but it isn't any longer. (Ben Free = been free). America has lost her vision, the vision of a free nation, symbolized by the abandonment of High Country (the high ground, the ideal). America is full of people living in destructive sins (the four characters) and presided over by psychiatrists, who are themselves as insane as the America-Asylum they guard. America is a fallen and perverted Land of Oz. Ben Free escapes this Oz by going back to early America, and so never leaves Oz until he dies. The others are given the opportunity to transform this fallen Oz into a good Oz, not by killing back witches, but by killing the bad parts of themselves.

Free-Whitten goes back to the days of Lewis and Clark, when America was free, and when Americans still were explorers with vision. That's his personal escape, but it's not an answer to the problem. The answer is for Americans to go back to being moral and spiritual people. The four characters are given the chance to change their lives and to become such people. As such, perhaps they as the Quadrivium can lead America forward (and back) to what America should be (and once was). The moral part of their transformation is clear, but the need for Serpentina to see through the fakeries and dangers of witchcraft points to a need for religious/spiritual transformation also.

Thus, in a very broad sense, Ben Free is partly a kind of Christ figure, providing an opportunity to have a "new birth."

A final thought. I don't know where the gizmo was hidden in the "wall" of Ben Free's house, but I'm betting that it was behind the sign that read Free Live Free. That seems to be hinted at in the last chapter. Little Ozzie says "there's a sign," and "sign" can have two meanings. The physical sign is Free Live Free. Barnes seems to link this with the gizmo. But I'm not sure about this.

JBJordan (Nutria)

William Ansley — 20 Apr 2001, 01:11 · follows James Jordan

At 11:12 AM -0500 4/18/01, James Jordan wrote:

Second, the characters: I suspect that many of the minor characters come from later Oz books, since Wolfe is familiar with them. I'm not interested in reading these to see if this might be the case, however.

I have seen this idea that there are strong parallels to _The Wonderful Wizard of Oz_ (aka _The Wizard of Oz_ in later printings) in _Free Live Free_ batted around in this list over and over, but have never found it very convincing. (Didn't this idea originate in a review by John Clute?)

But you make a better case than I've seen before. However, I still think that the Oz associations are much looser than you do; I really don't think Wolfe took any of the minor characters from later Oz books. I think I am qualified to make this statement. I have re-read all 14 of Baum's

original books fairly recently when I wrote my long series of essays (well, really, rough drafts of essays) about the Oz references in Wolfe's novella, "The Eyeflash Miacles." This is presumably how you know that he is familiar with the books.

And don't forget the movie! It is different from the book in many ways, but it is explicitly referred to in FLF and the Oz books aren't. Wolfe's Oz references in TEM are almost all from the books, or could be, but there is one reference that can only come from the movie. The character/hallucination Little Tib perceives as Dorothy towards the end of TEM wears ruby slippers; in the book they were silver shoes.

TEM seems to have another link with FLF, it, along with Peace and some of Wolfe's other short stories including The Hero as Werewolf and Forlesen have characters who mourn a "lost American past" and feel that they or their ancestors were somehow banished from their rightful place in the American present.

But you make a good case and if I have time I will re-read FLF and keep a very sharp eye out for Oz stuff, especially from the later books.

On a more or less unrelated note, you say:

Thus, in a very broad sense, Ben Free is partly a kind of Christ figure, providing an opportunity to have a "new birth."

I think Wolfe makes an extended joke about this in FLF, as I wrote quite a while ago (May 6, 1998). I have made a few minor edits, but I am quoting in full because nobody commented on this message when I originally posted it, so possibly no one remembers it:

I re-read FLF a while ago and noticed something that hasn't been discussed in this group. Since all (most?) of Wolfe's major works have a Christ figure in them, one would expect FLF to have one, too. Ben Free seems to be the closest thing to one. He does offer the four protagonists a "new life" at the end of the book, just before the epilogue, and just before this he says that he arranged that they all get their greatest desires "because I've learned that we all have to get them before we can have better ones."

But, in FLF, it is (more or less) directly implied that Ben Free is the Son of God. Dr Makee "is" God. This comes from Ch. 11, P. 69 of the Tor pb. ed.:

"Do I look like God?" the old doctor said. "I don't know." As a matter of fact he did look like God. He was a small, elderly man who sported a little white beard and an even whiter mustache; the collar of a tattersall shirt--an almost infallible sign of the presense of deity--peeped above the collar of his overcoat.

and Ben Free is his son, from ch. 31, p. 206:

The old doctor began to pump the blood pressure cuff. "He was my son, you know." Barnes stared at him, and he chuckled again. "Not my actual son--Tommy died a long while ago, and I think Ben was really a few years older than I am. But we used to pretend that way and we had a lot of fun. ..."

and finally this from ch. 36, p. 241-242:

Barnes shook his head.

"She said, 'God, you gotta take care of Baby Phil because he won't never take care of himself.' I wasn't there, but Bubba was, and he told me. God has to get me out, and you're his chosen instrument."

"Instrument, hell. I never even met Him!"

Dr. Makee chuckled and nudged Barnes with an elbow. "Don't be too sure."

Now all of this is done in a playful, not to mention peculiar, way and probably isn't meant to be taken seriously.

But then FLF is a playful, not to mention peculiar, novel. Moreover, I am not at all sure it isn't meant to be taken seriously.

William Ansley

James Jordan — 20 Apr 2001, 09:38 · follows William Ansley

I think Wolfe makes an extended joke about this in FLF, as I wrote quite a while ago (May 6, 1998). I have made a few minor edits, but I am quoting in full because nobody commented on this message when I originally posted it, so possibly no one remembers it:

William Ansley

Sorry. I looked back through all my posts, and did not see this, or I'd've given you credit. Good discussion of Makee (maker) and Ben (Hebrew for son). Makes sense to me.

Jim Jordan