

PEACE: Coldhouse expanded

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 10 Jul 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2719>

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 10 Jul 2001, 09:59

I wrote:

Here's another quick one: FEAR and LOVE. It may be that the whole point of the cold house prank is to show how Weer is in fear of the other person (a vengeful ghost) who seems to be inside the empty house with him in the frametale. In the final page, in one reading at least, the other person is revealed to be Olivia, the loved one (whose death was so crushing to him). (Thus: Weer is dead; yet death is an illusion.)

Allow me to expand upon that.

We read the coldhouse story. Because of the context of the larger novel, and because it is spooky, we sense that Weer is scared. Because of the conventions of ghost stories, as well as the context of the larger novel (Bobby Black), we suspect that Weer was somehow responsible for the prank, and that is why he is fearful of the ghost.

Speaking only for myself and others I've talked with, we have spent a lot of time, often enjoyable, trying to figure out this angle: timeline issues, possible motives, the odd tie-in with the enigmatic Chinese garden dream, the off-stage death of Professor Peacock, and other threads.

But today I backtrack, and it seems that the simple answer is that Weer fears the ghost because it is a ghost, just as anyone might fear a ghost--one need not be the murderer of a person to fear that person's ghost. We know that Weer is responsible for Bobby Black's death (at least until that stage when we start to doubt the historicity of Bobby Black), but that doesn't mean that Weer was the prankster (even though he seems to know a lot of details, etc.). In fact, Weer as president might feel somewhat more singled out for revenge than the average worker, but again, anybody can be afraid of a ghost.

Applying meta-answer number one ("Weer getting used to being dead . . ."), we have the irony that Weer himself is the ghost haunting the house--a ghost afraid of ghosts! But that's what the majority of the book is about.

I also wrote:

The next meta-answer, also simple but I think also important, is something like "Weer spent perhaps too much of his life reading books rather than living life directly, and as a result his afterlife experience is a journey like that of Don Quixote/Walter Mitty/Gumby; as he experiences his own AMERICAN BOOK OF THE DEAD he cobbles together a text from the various texts he read and loved throughout his life, texts which, ultimately, might have little or no relation to "real" history, but intimate relation to the essential dream history (his psyche, his spirit, his whatchamacallit); his is an apology (or a working out, or a therapy, or a regurgitation) for having read too much."

In PEACE there is a strong theme of how books are lies. Fiction, of course, is all lies; but even non-fiction includes untruths, and science itself is just an imperfect approximation. Then there

are forgeries, which would seem to be the most complete lies of all.

Weer's story has little to do with his life and much to do with his reading. In the past we have taken this in realistic, psychological terms as meaning he is masking some things that are too painful for him to deal with otherwise (so the romancing of Olivia turns into a fairytale fragment--the best case we have of "history" being mapped by "fiction"). But, to backtrack, to try a different tack, it may be more the case that Weer did not have much of a life outside of books--the thing he is "masking" is the fact that he wasn't engaged in life the way he was engaged with books (ala Don Quixote).

One might go further and say that Weer regrets he didn't skip all those other books and read the Bible alone, but I don't think the text goes in that direction.

Now I'll trot out the old Robert Graves' chestnut, the five-stages of the hero: Birth, Initiation, Reign, Repose, Death.

Birth -- Alden Dennis Weer (section 1); covers the childhood. Initiation -- Olivia (section 2) Reign -- The Alchemist (section 3) Repose -- Gold (section 4); features the wounding of the hero. Death -- The President (section 5)

=mantis=

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Adam Stephanides — 11 Jul 2001, 11:03 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

on 7/10/01 11:59 AM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:

We know that Weer is responsible for Bobby Black's death (at least until that stage when we start to doubt the historicity of Bobby Black),

At the time of the big PEACE discussion, I dreamed up a theory as a reductio ad absurdum of the unreliable Weer: that nothing interesting actually happened to Weer--he made up Bobby Black, the egg hunt, the coldhouse prank, the treasure hunt, and all to conceal the fact that he led a boring life. It sounds like you've been seriously contemplating something like this theory (which I'd actually be more willing to take seriously now than I did then).

--Adam

Dan — 11 Jul 2001, 11:54 · follows Adam Stephanides

Dan here, finally delurking after being both enlightened and intimidated for some time now:

Adam Stephanides wrote:

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I don't know what the consensus is on the ending of the novel, but I took Weer's remark about waking, in the context of the Chinese garden dream, to mean either that he is at last waking to

a higher, more realized existence (as in the Borges tale - I forget the title - of the man who dies and only after a series of nightmares realizes that he has in fact been in heaven all along), or that Weer is himself as a child dreaming of his own future and death.

This in turn reminded me of a fairy tale I read once upon a time (so long ago that though I can remember the shape of the book and the pictures I have no clue what the source was), in which a boy is given a magical ball of string. Whenever he pulls on the string his life advances by a proportionate amount. One morning in school he pulls the string and finds that school has already let out for the afternoon. When he's drafted into the army he pulls it a great ways until that's over. And so on. Until at last when he's an old man he realizes that he can remember nothing of his life because he never experienced it. At that point I think the angel who gave him the ball reappears and grants him a second go at it.

Now with Adam's and mantis's remarks I find myself thinking about that story again and wondering if a person who has essentially opted out of 'real life' wouldn't try in various ways to fill in the gaps, to at least speculate on what might have occurred. Weer might not be fabricating his life in totum (except in the sense that he may be dreaming it) but I do think he wants his account to guess at bigger things. Of course Wolfe has a habit of leaving big things off-stage and may have a variety of aesthetic reasons for it, but I begin to suspect that his full-moon alter ego is coming as close as possible to outright lying in order to imply that (for instance) he shot Lois or locked the worker in the coldroom.

dan