

There Is No Hope Road

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Aug 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 27 Aug 2001, 09:40

Tony Ellis (no, really!) wrote:

There you have it: solving the mystery in detective fiction brings order,
solving it in film noir brings the discovery that there -is- no order.

Well, yes, but before film noir was Dashiell Hammett, (whose THE MALTESE FALCON is, in essence, the ur-text of film noir: but it was a novel before it was a film). In Hammett's world, and especially that of his unnamed hero, the Continental Op, we have precisely the world of the Norse sagas

-- there is ultimately no order, no justice, but honor demands that we act as if there were and, bring them to pass where we can.

Broadly speaking I would agree with what I take to be the general consensus: that this is precisely the sort of mystery Gene Wolfe does not write. But at least one important exception springs immediately to mind: The Fifth Head of Cerberus. In both the first and the final novellas, the 'detective' far from solving a mystery becomes ensnared in one. The universe remains corrupt and unsolved.

But then, 5HC is almost exactly a portrait of an fallen but unsaved world; it is precisely in such a world that the hardboiled detective story and the feelm nwah take place. (And there is no hope, as near as I can tell, for the redemption of Number Five Wolf(e)* and/or "Dr Mars(c)h," leaving 5HC one of the most unbearably depressing books I have ever read.)

* (Any relation to Number Ten Ox?)

In fact it's just hit me: the seedy underworlds of St Anne and St Croix are pure film noir, complete with criminal kingpin, bent cops, and femmes fatales. Does anyone else think "Mean Streets: The Fifth Head of Cerberus Considered as Film Noir" sounds like a good title for a Wolfe essay?

How about "The Detective of Nightmares?" <g> -- yes, it's a workable title.

--Dan'l