

In Glory Like Their Star (SPOILERS) F&SF Mag story

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 29 Jan 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2891>

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.

Adam Stephanides — 29 Jan 2002, 18:20

I know this is old news by now, but I was waiting until I could check the magazine (F & SF, Oct/Nov 2001) out of my library to write; and then I was waiting until Ranjit re-established the list to post. In any case, this is another good but enigmatic story by Wolfe. I don't understand the narrator's thought processes at all; perhaps that was Wolfe's intention?

I agree with Nutria that the "natives'" approach to the aliens represents pagan ritual, but I'd go further. Ancient mystery cults promised those who were initiated immortality after death, and the narrator promises the man who helps him immortality. The initiation ceremonies took place in a temple or cave, like the interior of the ship where the narrator tries to fulfill his promise. The narrator tells all this to the natives; he believes he has succeeded in explaining that he failed, but he's probably wrong (despite what he thinks, he comprehends the natives no better than they do him). I think what we see in this story is the birth of a mystery religion.

But then there are those strange echoes of Christianity. Christ (in Christian doctrine) sacrificed himself knowingly, while the man sacrifices himself unknowingly. Christ rose on the third day, while the narrator tries for three days to give the man immortality and then kills him. Unlike Joshua, though, I see these echoes as parodic. (Or perhaps it's a cautionary tale: if you follow a false god, you get incinerated.)

And why did the narrator kill the man? Was it out of mercy, since the man has killed his beast and can't enter the narrator's ship, and so is doomed to die of thirst in the desert? But the narrator gives no explanation.

Another peculiar thing is the narrator's reference to two subspecies, one larger and without tails, and "the little ones with tails." My first thought was that the "lesser" subspecies were some sort of domestic animal, but it's hard to see how the narrator would think that any such animal is of the same species as humans (he's aware that the man's beast is a beast, and not of the man's species). The other possibility that occurred to me was that the "lesser" subspecies is women, but of course women don't have tails. This makes me wonder if the story really takes place on Earth (the narrator's reference to Earth could be a translation of whatever the "natives" call their planet).

on 8/31/01 7:28 PM, Endy9 at endymion91 at home.com wrote:

2. What is the deal about the earth not being a sphere because the desert is a flat spot where gravity works differently? Is the desert the mysterious hidden "Eden" man is still searching for? Something on a different plane where gravity, time, etc. work differently that the alien could see but man can't?

This is the narrator's misapprehension. He thinks that in the desert "the horizon is larger than a place of this size can produce," and deduces that the desert is geometrically flat; that is not following the earth's curvature, but a plane intersecting the earth's sphere. If this were the case, then the desert's edges would be further from the center of the earth than the desert's center, so walking away from the center would be like walking uphill (though I doubt that the

effect would actually be perceptible; certainly not at the center itself).

3. Why does the narrator talk of traveling "alone" but make many references to "others" who aren't earth dwellers from what I can tell?

He came to the solar system with the "others," but travelled alone with his scout to the earth's surface. After finding his scout again he returned to his ship, and then he and the others landed and met the natives.

4. Sol died?

No; if Sol had actually died "in glory," that could only mean it had gone nova, in which case there could be no life on earth. When the narrator says "died swiftly and in glory like their star," it is the star, not the death of the star, which is "in glory."

The sentence about the earth man stopping his beast and causing it to lie down on the desert sand for some reason made me think it could be a camel in the past or a hovercar in the future.

Since the narrator goes on to talk about him and the native eating the beast, presumably it's not a hovercar.

Joshua wrote:

Everything but the desert appeared to vanish as the narrator approached. On one level, this merely implies that the narrator's journey took a long time. On another level, it might mean that material things *effectively* disappeared for the narrator.

Surely this just refers to mirages?

--Adam

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net

Michael Andre-Driussi — 30 Jan 2002, 17:36 · follows Adam Stephanides

My thinking on this story was very similar to what Adam posted.

In any case, this is another good but enigmatic story by Wolfe. I don't understand the narrator's thought processes at all; perhaps that was Wolfe's intention?

I agree. There is something opaque about the narrator and the story: whether this is due to alien-ness or something-being-hidden or something-else-again seems to be an open question.

I agree with Nutria that the "natives'" approach to the aliens represents pagan ritual, but I'd go further. Ancient mystery cults promised those who were initiated immortality after death, and the narrator promises the man who helps him immortality. The initiation ceremonies took place in a temple or cave, like the interior of the ship where the narrator tries to fulfill his promise. The narrator tells all this to the natives; he believes he has succeeded in explaining that he failed, but he's probably wrong (despite what he thinks, he comprehends the natives no better than they do him). I think what we see in this story is the birth of a mystery religion.

Again, I agree. I don't recall if Nutria's trailblazing posts covered what I am about to suggest, thus it seems new to me, but I also thought that the natives were directing the space traveler into being like a god. That is, it wasn't exactly a top-down, "me-god, you worship" type of thing, but more of a movement from bottom to top. The traveler is being manipulated into acting like a god, but the traveler resists certain things, so the result is by definition a compromise of visions. To me the story is "The Fisherman and the Genie Bottle" crossed with the formation of a mystery/cargo cult, finally becoming the tale of a reluctant god.

Another peculiar thing is the narrator's reference to two subspecies, one larger and without tails, and "the little ones with tails." My first thought was that the "lesser" subspecies were some sort of domestic animal, but it's hard to see how the narrator would think that any such animal is of the same species as humans (he's aware that the man's beast is a beast, and not of the man's species). The other possibility that occurred to me was that the "lesser" subspecies is women, but of course women don't have tails. This makes me wonder if the story really takes place on Earth (the narrator's reference to Earth could be a translation of whatever the "natives" call their planet).

Yes. And that whole weird thing about the desert . . .

This is the narrator's misapprehension. He thinks that in the desert "the horizon is larger than a place of this size can produce," and deduces that the desert is geometrically flat; that is not following the earth's curvature, but a plane intersecting the earth's sphere. If this were the case, then the desert's edges would be further from the center of the earth than the desert's center, so walking away from the center would be like walking uphill (though I doubt that the effect would actually be perceptible; certainly not at the center itself).

Let's use some numbers here. On Earth-like planets (diameter), in a region of flat-smoothness (ocean, sandy wastes), a standing human will perceive the horizon at about 5 km away. Anything further than that would be abnormal.

So I started thinking about places like the Gobi Desert, and that old kook/pulp notion that it was created by nuclear explosions by ancient astronauts. The narrator's description makes the relation of the planet to the desert spot like an orange that has had its peel grated a bit: a sphere which has had a small, glancing slice removed.

How big would this circle be? Traveling 5 km is trivial: the narrator travels many days, but in many different directions.

Then there is the navigational weirdness, which seems somewhat like being at one of the poles with a compass and then the pole starts (impossibly) moving. If the "compass" of the story is reacting to magnetic fields, it may be responding to buried magnetized masses, a cluster of local "poles" of a sort.

No; if Sol had actually died "in glory," that could only mean it had gone nova, in which case there could be no life on earth. When the narrator says "died swiftly and in glory like their star," it is the star, not the death of the star, which is "in glory."

Yes, I agree about the nova, but I myself took the "solar glory" to mean that the native was washed by the ship's fusion exhaust as it launched. Because I'm otherwise vague on how the swift glory came about after the trials of three days.

Joshua wrote:

Everything but the desert appeared to vanish as the narrator approached. On one level, this merely implies that the narrator's journey took a long time. On another level, it might mean that material things *effectively* disappeared for the narrator.

Surely this just refers to mirages?

Yes, mirages. But this, in turn, fed into my "vanished cities of the ancients" sense of the story. That is: they point to the possibility of vanished cities on this otherwise pre-city planet.

Gene Wolfe's "Planet of the Apes"? It does seem a bit like it, especially with the smaller species

having tails.

=mantis=

Sirius Fiction

booklets on Gene Wolfe, John Crowley

<http://www.siriusfiction.com/>

Questions or problems: write ranjit at urth.net