

Peace: Who killed Mr. Tilly?

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 22 May 2002

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StoneOx17 — 22 May 2002, 09:42

Hello,

Did Mrs. Tilly's ghost really poison Mr. Tilly? I haven't seen this question discussed in the mailing list, so I'm assuming that most people think the ghost did it. I think it must be somebody else. I'm not quite sure who, so I'm going to list all the suspects I can come up with, and give my thoughts. Maybe someone can find more clues and unambiguously identify the real culprit.

Why do I suspect it wasn't the ghost? What made me suspicious in the first place is that in two places, Wolfe has people suspect that it wasn't. Julius Smart says to Mr. Tilly "Then I told him that when he'd said the ghost was putting that stuff in his food I hadn't believed him; I'd heard of them playing the piano and unlocking doors and all that--even pulling the covers off beds--but never of putting something in someone's food before." Later, Blaine says to Weer, who's seeing him about Gold's book, "Anyway, I never believed in the ghost. I think that woman was alive ..." and proceeds to give an explanation of how somebody trying to peek out unobserved could make a window curtain move and have it look like a ghost.

Of course, Blaine is wrong about half the things he says. But I think Wolfe is giving us hints here, and that Julius is right about ghosts not being able to poison people. The one ghost we know best from this book, Weer, certainly couldn't. So here's my list of suspects.

1. Mrs. Tilly's ghost.

Pro: this is the most straightforward interpretation. She has a good motive: revenge. Con: Mrs. Tilly's ghost would have to be a lot more together than Weer's ghost for this. And it seems unlikely that a ghost could poison people if it's correct that ghosts are souls in Purgatory waiting for admission to Heaven when (or if) they accept Jesus and repent of their sins. Since I like this interpretation, I don't want to believe that it was Mrs. Tilly's ghost, even if she was haunting the house.

2. Mrs. Tilly, still alive.

Pro: this is what Blaine believes. If Mr. Tilly killed their son by experimenting on him, she has a motive. Con: Blaine is wrong half the time. Furthermore, either Mrs. Tilly would have to somehow have survived her immersion in a methanol-filled coffin, or (as Blaine has it) there's a methanol-filled coffin lying around for no apparent reason which she accidentally tumbles into after Mr. Tilly dies. I don't think there's any chance that this is correct.

3. Mr. Tilly himself, in a Jekyll-and-Hyde act.

Pro: this is indeed a Wolfean thing to happen.

Con: I don't see any clues that this is happening. Of course, Wolfe's clues are notoriously hard to find.

4. One of Mr. Tilly's clients, or somebody else, from a carnival.

Pro: He (she) could have had access to the drug that killed Mr. Tilly, by stealing it from Mr. Litho

or another client. He (she) could easily have a motive. Con: The drug was administered over a period of years. A stranger, especially one of Mr. Tilly's carnie clients, would be fairly conspicuous hanging around a small town.

5. Mrs. Tilly's relatives. There are three of them around--two aunts and an uncle. Pro: Their motive would be revenge for Mrs. Tilly's death. If they had keys, it's plausible that one of them could hide in the locked bedroom containing Mrs. Tilly's coffin, and sneak out at night to put the drug in Mr. Tilly's food. Hearing her (I'm assuming it's an aunt, since Mr. Tilly says her footsteps sound like his wife's) Mr. Tilly and Julius think she's Mrs. Tilly's ghost. After Mr. Tilly dies, the key to the locked bedroom is missing; if one of Mrs. Tilly's relatives stole it, this explains why it's gone. Also, Mrs. Tilly's relatives take a number of valuables out of the house, but don't even ask to look in the locked bedroom containing Mrs. Tilly's coffin. One explanation might be that they already know what's in there. They also let Julius continue running the pharmacy at a very generous wage, and let him live rent-free in the house. Maybe they're trying to bribe him just in case he suspects something. Con: They could be letting him live rent-free because the house has a reputation for being haunted, and there's nobody else who'd rent it. And they could have continued letting him work at the pharmacy for the generous wages that Mr. Tilly gave him because they don't want the town's only pharmacy closed, and they're either too nice to reduce his wages, or don't realize how generous they're being. Also, you'd think it'd be a lot safer to sneak into Mr. Tilly's house in daytime when he was at the drugstore, and if for some reason the aunt was surprised by Mr. Tilly coming home unexpectedly, you'd think she'd hide in the locked bedroom until she could leave the house, and not pace up and down the hall like a ghost. Finally, I've been thinking about Blaine's explanation about how somebody could look out a window and not be seen by hiding under the window, twitching the curtain, and looking in a mirror on the opposite wall. It'd certainly work on the first floor (where Blaine presumably would have used it) but I'm not sure it'd work on the second, which is where Julius saw the window curtains twitch.

6. Julius Smart.

This is the most interesting one.

Pro: He has a motive: money. Charlie Turner (the dog-boy) shows up to visit when Weer was president. We can assume that he is trying to visit Julius, and hadn't heard about his death. If he was visiting because he needed more of the hair medicine, then it would seem that Julius took over Mr. Tilly's carnie business. In this case, you don't need to assume that Mr. Tilly's wages were excessively generous to explain how Julius got enough money to buy Bledsoe's drugstore--Julius could be lying so as to have an acceptable explanation for his money. And if he killed Mr. Tilly, then he's lying about a lot more than that. In this scenario, how much of Julius's story can we trust? From Charlie Turner's visit, we have independent evidence of Mr. Tilly's hair medicine, which I think means we can trust the account of Julius's visit to the carnival and of Janet Turner's visit to the drugstore. And even if Julius poisoned him, I'd tend to believe that Mr. Tilly was petrified by his own medicine. But I don't know how much of the rest of the story to believe in this case. Was there a ghost? A locked room? A methanol-filled zinc coffin?

If Julius did poison Mr. Tilly, you'd expect there to be clues. I'd expect Wolfe to have hidden several inconsistencies in Julius's account, so a reader discovering them could deduce that Julius was lying. And, of course, upon looking for them, I picked up a couple of things that look like inconsistencies. It's hard to tell whether they're Julius Smart's mistakes, or Gene Wolfe's mistakes, or even whether they're mistakes at all. Here they are.

a) The season. When Julius Smart goes grocery shopping, he picks up oranges, which must be in season since he says they were locally grown and cheap. My grandparents lived in Florida, and had an orange (and lemon) tree in the backyard; these gave fruit in the winter. Looking on the web, I found a page saying that domestic oranges were in season (depending on the variety)

mainly from October through April, and Weer got oranges for Christmas as a special treat when he was a kid. The season may be even shorter if you restrict yourself to the gulf coast. However, on the day Julius buys the oranges, it's still 90 degrees after midnight, which one would expect only happens closer to summer. If Julius poisoned Mr. Tilly over a course of several months or a year, and his story was put together from several incidents over this course of time, one might expect this type of inconsistency.

b) Mr. Tilly is very careful about not putting salt and pepper on his food, and on one of the mornings he has only coffee, apparently because he's scared to eat anything else. But you'd think it would be just as easy to put the poison in coffee, and that he'd realize this (although if he's as much of a caffeine addict as I am, he might drink it anyway).

Con: It's rather disturbing to have doubt cast on the truth of the story of Mrs. Tilly's ghost, and Julius's discovery of her body in the coffin. Also, unless I'm missing some, the clues about the inconsistency of Julius's story are pretty thin.

A few final comments. If Mrs. Tilly's ghost didn't poison Mr. Tilly, this gives a nice symmetry to the book, with five mysterious deaths or disappearances, one for each of the five sections: Bobby Black, Aunt Vi, Mr. Tilly, the librarian, and the coldhouse kid. Of course, the case could be made that this count is somewhat arbitrary, since we're leaving out Doris Mason's and Sherry Gold's deaths I would counter that the most mysterious thing about Doris's death is why she is in the book in the first place, and that Sherry's death occurred long after Weer's. Secondly, if Julius did poison Mr. Tilly, this helps explain Weer's comment that Julius Smart is really the central character of this book.

Finally, I just reread *Seven American Nights* (many thanks to Robert Borski for his brilliant deciphering of it). The never-staling bread in that story, and the imitation frozen orange juice factory in Peace, make me wonder what Wolfe's feelings towards his former profession really are.

Many thanks,

Peter (Stone Ox)

Michael Andre-Driussi — 22 May 2002, 15:31 · follows StoneOx17

Stone Ox wrote in detail about the death of Mr. Tilly in PEACE.

Instead of addressing the whole, which looks quite sound, I only have a few tidbits at the moment.

About Sherry Gold, Stone Ox wrote:

I would counter that the most mysterious thing about Doris's death is why she is in the book in the first place, and that Sherry's death occurred long after Weer's.

No, my understanding is that Sherry died and then Weer had a stroke the day after. This stroke may or may not have been fatal.

With regard to the whole Tilly story, I recall talking around here (iirc) with Robert Borski. We were wondering if the story was a displaced autobiography, like Weer's "fairy tale" version of Olivia's suitors as "The Princess and Her Three Suitors." More pointedly, it might be congruent to Weer's "Arabian Nights" version of his past/future in "Ben Yahya and the Marid" story: both have ties to the Arabian Nights ("Marid" in surface; "Tilly" in plot and image of the husband slowly turning to stone); both are ambiguously about the teller's past or future, et cetera.

That is, "Tilly" might be Smart himself ("Julius T. Smart," after all). Which in a way combines Stone Ox's #3 and #6 (3. Mr. Tilly himself, in a Jekyll-and-Hyde act. 6. Julius Smart.).

Our thinking on this became more noodly. Looking for a true past event for the story becomes problematic (there might not be a real murder), but looking for a true future event is all too easy: Tilly's wife is maltreated by Tilly (Olivia's appetites are not met by Smart); Tilly's wife turns into a monster (Olivia becomes monstrously large); Tilly's wife dies (Olivia killed); Tilly is haunted by her; Tilly dies and is replaced by an outsider (Smart dies and is replaced by Weer).

Add to the mix that recurrent thread about how ghostly visions come from the future as well as from the past; as well as the Wolfe theme about how even tall tales somehow can come true.

=mantis=