

The Coldhouse Prank

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 21 Aug 2002

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Robert Borski — 21 Aug 2002, 06:33

One of the bigger mysteries in PEACE involves the coldhouse prank. Who is its perpetrator and who is victim? Most people seem to believe that Den is the perpetrator, but in the 27 years since PEACE first came out, I've read only one attempt at identifying the victim (mantis, hypothesizing a son of Professor Peacock; see <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0030/0549.shtml>). If for nothing other than at least doubling the alternatives, I'd like now to offer my own theory about who it is that's locked up in the coldhouse prank and why he ends up there.

I'll be the first to admit there are several different ways of looking at PEACE (in fact, I use the Purgatory model in the essay I wrote for Scribner's), but one of the virtues of the Faust reading that I outline in my "The Devil His Due" essay is that it allows me to resolve several of PEACE's more enduring mysteries--at least within the terms I establish. Why, for example, the relationship between Den and Margaret Lorn never works out, or why Julius Smart is, by Den's definition, the book's central character. It wasn't, however, until I discovered how integral alchemy is to the book's overall organization that I was able to glean an answer about the coldhouse prank's victim. In essence, as a good model should, it allowed me to predict an answer I never expected to find.

As you may or may not recall, I postulate that each chapter in PEACE represents a step in the alchemical process of transforming a base material into gold. Each chapter has a representative character, color, and animal associated with the process--all derived from, or based on, classical alchemy. Each of the characters, in turn, is met in the opening scene, when Den finds himself in Dr. Van Ness's waiting room. The lone character, however, that seems hardest to fit into the scheme is Ted Singer, representing the chapter "The President." That is, until you investigate the animal associated with red, the fifth and final color in the alchemical sequence: the pelican. Symbolically, the bird has an incredibly rich history associating it with Christ, mainly due to the medieval belief that it fed its young with blood torn from its own breast (what it really does is dip its beak into its pouch to retrieve fish).

Let us therefore consider a little more deeply the implications of a pelican-Singer connection, which if you'll accept the above scheme as possibly legitimate, associates Ted Singer with God (el presidente grande de cielo, no? just as Weer is later president of the juice factory). The name Ted is the Anglicized version of Theo--Greek for God. And what is the livelihood of Ted's grandfather? He's a building contractor, which makes Ted's father Joshua ben Joseph--the likeliest victim of the coldhouse prank. (Remember, all through PEACE, whether we're talking about the Weers, the Lorns, or the Singers, we're talking about families, and just as the Devil's name is legion, so too might we expect God to be pluripresent and multi-generational.) One further connection exists, but before I end with that, I'd like to recast the Singer-Weer polarity, this time looking at Den and Ted as another mythic dyad, Dionysius and Orpheus.

Where Late The Sweet Birds Sang

I've already mentioned the Dionysius/Dennis link in the main body of "The Devil His Due." But is it possible that "Singer" also represents Orpheus--like Jesus, another harrower of hell, who's seeking to undo the damage caused by a serpent--and that this classically-based allusion accounts for Den killing a member of the Singer clan? Dionysius, after all, does sic the Maenads upon Orpheus when he doesn't pay him the proper respects, whereupon the Maenads tear Orpheus limb from limb. It's also possible that Singer has been involved with Sherry Gold. Not only is there an argument between Ted and Sherry's brother Aaron at one point (Den says it is of a religious nature, and what is probably the prime area of contention between a Christian and a Jew? Whether Jesus Christ was the Messiah, right?); but Sherry admits to Weer that she's had sex with several high school boys, one of whom might be Ted. Onomasts will note that the last syllable of Theodore and the first syllable of Doris derive from the same Greek word--doros, meaning gift. Could Doris therefore be the possible daughter of Ted and Sherry Gold? This might subsequently play to the notion of Sherry-as-Eurydice, where Ted/Orpheus attempts to prevent her from becoming further involved with Den Weer or possibly having his child. But Ted, like his Greek exemplar fails, and Eurydice-Sherry is unable to avoid or leave symbolic hell. (Eurydice, of course, has died from a snakebite.)

As for Ted's grandmother, Sophie, she bears the faux Indian name Princess Singing Bird. But observe what Den's grandfather Elliot has in his museum-like front parlor: a stuffed "large bird beneath a glass bell jar on the center table." Think Christic pelican here, or cockeral--another bird associated with the reddening process. In addition, when Den has the Chinese garden dream that is so enticing to him, "that to wake would be a horror," and therefore "that it was best to remain twenty-five and happy, walking the wandering little sanded path under the cypresses and cedars for as long as I could," he finds two objects of significance: "an earthenware troll with a fierce, sad face and stumpy limbs, fallen from his little pedestal" and a dead bird whose breast feathers blow across the path, are caught, and turn out to be the remnants of a paper lantern. The garden, I'm going to suggest, is therefore Eden, site of the Adversary's greatest victory--the successful temptation of Adam (note that adam means "earth, clay" in Hebrew and that the troll is "fallen"), and this is why Den does not want to leave--imagine Robert E. Lee revisiting Fredericksburg. Both birds also symbolize the status of the doomed Singer/Orpheus clan-member in PEACE, and in the garden case show that fire will win over--as does perhaps an earlier comment from Den, who compares an Indian artifact given to him by Peacock to "a feather from a bird petrified," suggesting it is not the prehistoric saurians that have died out, but the Orpheid birds.

For the love of God, Montressor!

As can be seen by a careful reading of the novel, Ted Singer, his family, and their symbolic equivalents, crop up in some rather unusual places, but by far the strangest of them occurs in PEACE's second chapter. In what is quite possibly Gene Wolfe's oddest sentence ever, Den is going on and on about people having sex, and finally gets around to Ted, who's apparently bumping uglies with a fellow high school student named Melissa. Or as Wolfe, already in mid-parenthesis, convolutedly puts it:

"Melissa whom I used to see waiting with her textbooks and notebook propped on one hip when I drove my cold-natured, reluctant old Plymouth to the plant in the mornings, waiting for the school bus that never seemed to come early or even on time) and Ted (who never got into the game unless Consolidated was fourteen points ahead; Ted ran the four-forty but who cares about the four-forty?) leave Melissa's father's brick ranch-style and Ted's mother's Apt. 14 and become four-legged, two-backed, four-armed (oh, be forewarned!) two-headed Ted and Lisa into which each less-than-half has vanished more or less utterly, and (though the monster is not completely indissoluble still) never to reappear."

Beside the Othello-like nature of Weer's rant (he is, after all, Black Dutch--a descendant of Phillip II's Spanish soldiery), which might play to the green-eyed-monster-jealousy-revenge angle, there are a number of things noteworthy here. One is the conjoined polarities of Lisa-Ted copulating--an image perhaps of the Androgyne, a potent alchemical symbol. Another is Den's rather in-depth knowledge about what sports Ted participates in and the fact that Ted lives not with two parents, but his mother. What has happened to Mr. Singer, and is Den's obsessive detailing of Ted's sporting and sexual activities due to the fact that he's trying, either nobly or out of guilt, to act as surrogate father? Then there's also the hard-to-ignore repetition of the variant "four" nine times. Does this perhaps refer to the Sacred Tetragrammaton--Ted-Theo-YHWH? And is there any connection between this, and the passage where Sally Gold says of her daughter, Sherry: "Very forward for a girl of her age." Which is then echoed twice, once by Sherry, "Forward, for God's sake" (the italicization is Wolfe's), then by her mother, "Yes, forward for God's sake. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? Like an old battle cry. I don't believe soldiers talk that way anymore, but it might be interesting to find out when they stopped, and why."

Then again, perhaps long ago, in the coldhouse of Julius Smart's factory, this refrain from the oldest battle of all was said by a young man freezing to death, and echoes there still.

Robert Borski

StoneOx17 — 22 Aug 2002, 04:26 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski argues quite eloquently that Ted Singer's father is the victim in the coldhouse prank. I don't think this can be right, because the victim lived in a boarding house, was locked in on Friday, and nobody noticed he was missing until he was discovered on Monday. If the victim had had a wife or girlfriend, surely he would have been discovered sooner. I've pondered this question myself, and wondered whether the victim came from a farm family who lived far enough out of town that he had to take a room in town to work for the factory, and whether he could have been an acquaintance of the Lorns. I didn't find any suitable candidates mentioned, so I haven't said anything.

- Stone Ox

Robert Borski — 23 Aug 2002, 05:53 · follows StoneOx17

Stone Ox writes:

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But look who imparts this information about the weekend tragedy and the boarding house connection: Dan French, who, not having been a factory employee at the time, is simply repeating the sanitized version of the story as it's been spun down through the years and perhaps even through semi-official channels, since there's been a coverup. (I do, however, and for obvious reasons, like the notion that the victim died on Friday.) He doesn't remember the name of the victim and is completely unaware there is an even more sinister side to the entire

episode, with a lone person being responsible for the victim's death. As Den also reminds us earlier, such stories have a way of becoming "both faded and embroidered by time," which results in a further blurring of the details. And lastly when Dan French tells the story of the sidhe, it deviates from the traditional in several respects.

In other words I think there's plenty of reason to doubt his version of the story.

Robert Borski

StoneOx17 — 24 Aug 2002, 01:54 · follows Robert Borski

In a message dated 8/23/2002 7:57:25 PM Eastern Daylight Time, Robert Borski writes:

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When Dan French is telling the story of the sidhe, it's an embedded story, and Wolfe has changed, or invented, many (if not all) of the embedded stories, so as to shed light on events in the book. On the other hand, if we believe that Weer was the perpetrator of the coldhouse prank, I'd consider it part of Weer's own life story, and I'm much more reluctant to believe that Wolfe is altering the details here. But this relates to the whole unicorn debate, which I think we could argue about for eternity. I just had the thought that maybe part of the reason there's been so much discussion about Mr. Tilly's story and Doris's story is that it's not clear whether they should be counted as embedded stories or not.

-Stone Ox