

catamites and narrators

The Urth list — 16 messages, 10 voices, 13 Sep 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3457>

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maa32 — 13 Sep 2002, 04:28

Just a short note based off an old point made by James Jordan:

he claimed that Wolfe would never have a protagonist with homosexual encounters.

However, there is some evidence that works against this both in Fifth Head of Cerberus, in the relationship of Blood and Musk, and in the strange commentary made by Severian about little Severian - (when he insists that he didn't have anything to do with molesting the child, who would have thought of that before he brought it up? He plants the seed in the mind with his occupatio - "I didn't do it, so don't think I did")

Blood and Musk aren't evil because they are homosexual. Not even in Wolfe.

To have Severian defend himself creates a bit of suspicion, doesn't it? And Additionally, Mr. Borski has already elucidated on the strange preoccupation with circumscisions and various other repressed evidence of homosexual behavior in The Fifth Head of Cerberus, available at Cave Canem. For an author who should be a bit opposed to it, there seems to be an awful lot of it in his books - and a lot of it that goes relatively uncommented upon, too. While Wolfe may be clearly anti-feminist at times, I don't pick up this hostility to the very idea of homosexuality. After all, he loves Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. Just my two cents on something that was said many days ago. Sorry I'm so far behind. Marc Aramini

James Jordan — 13 Sep 2002, 14:46 · follows maa32

At 11:28 PM 9/12/2002, you wrote:

Just a short note based off an old point made by James Jordan:

he claimed that Wolfe would never have a protagonist with homosexual encounters. However, there is some evidence that works against this both in Fifth Head of Cerberus, in the relationship of Blood and Musk, and in the strange commentary made by Severian about little Severian - (when he insists that he didn't have anything to do with molesting the child, who would have thought of that before he brought it up? He plants the seed in the mind with his occupatio - "I didn't do it, so don't think I did")

Sorry I was unclear. I meant a "Christian moral exemplar" like Silk would not be involved in homosexual acts, in Wolfe. Severian is a "Christian symbol," but not much of a moral exemplar.

Nutty-Ria

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 13 Sep 2002, 16:02 · follows James Jordan

Just a short note based off an old point made by James Jordan:

he claimed that Wolfe would never have a protagonist with homosexual encounters.

While acknowledging Nutria's correction to "Christian moral exemplar," I wish to observe that it wasn't really necessary. Wolfe does not, in my opinion, involve any protagonist in such an encounter.

However,there is some evidence that works against this both in
Fifth Head of Cerberus,

With all due respect, Number Five is not a "protagonist." 5HC has none; it has viewpoint characters, but we do not -- I think it's clear that we are not supposed to -- "identify" with them. They are horrible, and we perceive them as horrible, and if any single thing is clear from the cryptic last line of the first novella, it's that there is no salvation or hope for any of them unless they are radically changed.

in the relationship of Blood and Musk,

Hardly protagonists. That would be Silk. Musk is one of several clearly and unambiguously evil figures in tBotLS; even his "love" is deeply warped by his evil. Blood is a more ambiguous figure, and at times there seems to be hope for him, but in the end he dies in, and because of, his own corruption.

and in the strange commentary made by Severian about little
Severian - (when he insists that he didn't have anything to
do with molesting the child, who would have thought of that
before he brought it up?

Anyone familiar with the culture of the Commonwealth, I think. As Nutria points out, Severian is not a "Christian moral exemplar," but he does seem to be very heterosexual ... unless you want to go for the "don-Juanism as a cover for homosexuality" blag.

On the other hand, Severian commits almost every other sexual sin available to him in the circumstances of his travels -- incest, fornication, a kind of adultery, rape ... though not, as near as I can recall, bestiality

-- so the lack of homosex actually kind of stands out as a blatant absence, donnit?

Blood and Musk aren't evil becuase they are homosexual. Not
even in Wolfe.

No, though it might be argued that they're homosexual because they're evil.

While Wolfe may be clearly anti-feminist at times, I don't
pick up this hostility to the very idea of homosexuality.

I think one point is that feminism is a political postion, while "homosexuality" (i.e., actual homosexual _acts_) are a sin. The one is something that can be vigorously opposed; the other is ... well, the orthodox Christian and Catholic position is that we are all sinners. I'm not to concentrate on your sin, but my own. And sins like homosexuality are, in the end, appetitive sins and so not as extreme as sins like blasphemy and violence. (Well, except in the somewhat extreme moral theology that regards all sexual sins as blasphemy against the Image of God.)

Jerry Friedman — 16 Sep 2002, 22:24 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

--- Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:

...

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has none; it has viewpoint characters, but we do not -- I think
it's clear that we are not supposed to -- "identify" with them.

I certainly identified with Number 5, despite his great differences from me, and I think the reader is supposed to. I don't have any problem with calling him the protagonist of the story. Not the hero.

They are horrible, and we perceive them as horrible, and if any single thing is clear from the cryptic last line of the first novella, it's that there is no salvation or hope for any of them unless they are radically changed.

Now I agree with that.

...

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Simply because all Severian's sexual acts require the same preference--grown women--whereas homosexuality, pedophilia, bestiality, latex, etc. require other preferences? Regardless of which ones you consider sinful and which you don't.

Incidentally, if by incest and "a kind of adultery" you mean his relationship with Dorcas, I really think those are Not His Fault. ...

Jerry Friedman

Robert Borski — 17 Sep 2002, 01:01 · follows Jerry Friedman

Marc Aramini writing originally:

For an author who should be a bit opposed to it, there seems to be an awful lot of it in his books - and a lot of it that goes relatively uncommented upon, too. While Wolfe may be clearly anti-feminist at times, I don't pick up this hostility to the very idea of homosexuality.

Then Blattid adding:

While acknowledging Nutria's correction to "Christian moral exemplar," I wish to observe that it wasn't really necessary. Wolfe does not, in my opinion, involve any protagonist in such an encounter.

Among my many works-in-progress (most of which will probably never see light of day), but promised to another venue, is an essay entitled "The Stained Altar Boy: The Pederast as Villain in the Works of Gene Wolfe." In it I hope to show that while on the whole Wolfe has remained relatively non-judgemental about homosexuality, he has frequently cast pederasts as villains, both major and minor, in a number of his works; whether it's the original John Marsch of Earth; the nameless physician in Vodalus's camp who sleeps with the youth Mamas; or Pasicrates, who may see in Latro the ideal victim (and whose continued sexual exploitation may be the source of Latro's deep depression at the end of ARETE, it being sensed but not remembered by our hero); moreover, how (with the exception of the middle example above) the pederastic acts are all off-stage and never directly mentioned, but must be deduced (Wolfe being far too subtle a writer to offer us an easily recognized child molester as villain).

Blattid again

On the other hand, Severian commits almost every other sexual sin available to him in the circumstances of his travels -- incest, fornication, a kind of adultery, rape ... though not, as near as I can recall, bestiality

But he does bed larval Apheta, who is clearly outside our species, and immature to boot. To some--and especially those factions on Urth who see all aliens as cacogens ("those filthy born"), this may constitute bestiality.

Robert Borski

James Jordan — 17 Sep 2002, 01:32 · follows Robert Borski

At 08:01 PM 9/16/2002, Borski wrote:

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Good points, and there are other examples also. But I question your title, since Wolfe grew up outside the Roman Catholic church. I doubt he had much if any knowledge of this problem growing up -- though I cannot recall if Louisiana was where he spent time as a youth, so he might have encountered it by hearsay. At any rate, I would question whether he had altar boy molestation in mind as he wrote these works -- as your title would imply to most readers of your essay.

FWIW

Nutria

Alice K. Turner — 17 Sep 2002, 03:35 · follows James Jordan

From: "Jerry Friedman"

reponding to Blattid:

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Incidentally, if by incest and "a kind of adultery" you mean his relationship with Dorcas, I really think those are Not His Fault.

I agree. It is certainly an original situation, and one that could only occur in SF. Both were unaware of it. Wolfe surely meant it to be provocative: more power--and I think he intended intellectual power to consider it--to him. It is the sort of thing SF seems to me to be meant to explore. If "a kind of adultery" refers to Cyriaca, well, I can't get too exercised about that, either. Nor rape if that refers to Jolenta, good grief! And fornication--since when do we start bleating about that? Yikes. Pederasty would be entirely different and entirely more

reprehensible than any of the above as they are presented. Baldanders does seem to be guilty, but he also commits a lot of crimes and tortures. Which, it seems to me, would indicate that pederasty is Not Permissible to a Hero, i.e. sinful.

Blood and Musk aren't evil because they are homosexual. Not even in Wolfe.

No, though it might be argued that they're homosexual because they're evil.

While Wolfe may be clearly anti-feminist at times, I don't pick up this hostility to the very idea of homosexuality.

Nor I, though it's a genre trope that occasionally crops up. So no, I don't think a lack of homosex for Sev stands out at all.

-alga

matthew.malthouse — 17 Sep 2002, 10:19 · follows Alice K. Turner

On 13/09/2002 05:28:32 maa32 wrote:

Additionally, Mr. Borski has already elucidated on the strange preoccupation with circumscisions and various other repressed evidence of homosexual behavior

[illegible]

<Profound boggle>

What in hell connects circumcision with repressed evidence of homosexual behaviour?

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Fifth Head of Cerberus, in the relationship of Blood and Musk, and in the strange commentary made by Severian about little Severian - (when he insists

that he didn't have anything to do with molesting the child, who would have

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■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

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the very idea of homosexuality. After all, he loves Proust's *Remembrance*

of

Things Past. Just my two cents on something that was said many days ago.

Sorry I'm so far behind.

Not hostile. The character's little commentary in the area of sexuality seems to be generally neutral.

However examples of such behaviour, such as Severian's glimpse of what he speculates might be Baldanders' catamite, are invariably associated with the "other side" (to be Manichean about it).

Severian doesn't say that he was tempted to paederasty with little Sev, rather that others would assume that he was. Perhaps it is more a commentary on the society of the Commonwealth than on Severian (then and later as author) that the possibility existed and any assumption worth pre-emptive denial.

Matthew

Jerry Friedman — 17 Sep 2002, 15:36 · follows matthew.malthouse

--- James Jordan <jbjordan4 at cox.net> wrote:

At 08:01 PM 9/16/2002, Borski wrote:

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of day), but promised to another venue, is an essay entitled "The

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Altar Boy: The Pederast as Villain in the Works of Gene Wolfe."

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Louisiana was where he spent time as a youth, so he might have encountered

it by hearsay. At any rate, I would question whether he had altar boy molestation in mind as he wrote these works -- as your title would imply to

most readers of your essay.

I think this problem has featured in stereotypes of the Catholic church for centuries (see Candide), probably for over a millennium, believed by many among both the knowledgeable and the ignorant. Want to read a joke? I didn't think so.

Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman — 17 Sep 2002, 15:50 · follows Jerry Friedman

--- Robert Borski <rborski at charter.net> wrote:

Marc Aramini writing originally:

...

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Altar Boy: The Pederast as Villain in the Works of Gene Wolfe." In it I hope to show that while on the whole Wolfe has remained relatively non-judgemental about homosexuality, he has frequently cast pederasts as villains, both major and minor, in a number of his works; whether it's the original John Marsch of Earth; the nameless physician in Vodalus's camp who sleeps with the youth Mamas; or Pasicrates, who may see in Latro the ideal victim (and whose continued sexual exploitation may be the source of Latro's deep depression at the end of ARETE, it being sensed but not remembered by our hero); moreover, how (with the exception of the middle example above) the pederastic acts are all off-stage and never directly mentioned, but must be deduced (Wolfe being far too subtle a writer to offer us an easily recognized child molester as villain).

An interesting topic. I just want to mention that I don't think it's accurate to call Pasicrates' exploitation of Latro pederasty, since Latro is a grown man.

Jerry Friedman

James Wynn — 17 Sep 2002, 16:09 · follows Jerry Friedman

--- Robert Borski <rborski at charter.net> wrote:

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Jerry Friedman then responded:

An interesting topic. I just want to mention that I don't think it's accurate to call Pasicrates' exploitation of Latro pederasty, since Latro is a grown man.

Crush interjects:

I was pretty sure that Pasicrates never had his way with Latro, although he wanted to. He tried to "force his hand" and lost it. I don't think see any hint that he was successful after Latro's return from the North. Are there some things specifically you noted? Latro's depression was surely due to the death of his lover, the Amazon (whose name I can't remember right now).

Jerry Friedman — 17 Sep 2002, 17:09 · follows James Wynn

--- James Wynn <crushtv at HotPOP.com> wrote:

--- Robert Borski <rborski at charter.net> wrote:

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Don't mind me. I'd forgotten that incident and was believing Robert. I'll leave this one to people who have the book.

Jerry Friedman

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 17 Sep 2002, 21:07 · follows Jerry Friedman

Things are arriving at my machine in weird, random order.

Incidentally, if by incest and "a kind of adultery" you mean his relationship with Dorcas, I really think those are Not His Fault.

I agree.

As do I, regarding incest. And so what? Consider Oedipus. Incest appears to be so vile that even unknown, it pollutes the world. Yet this is that world's savior ... go figure.

As for "a kind of adultery," what I basically meant was infidelity in his going after Jolenta right after his reunion with Dorcas.

It is certainly an original situation, and one that could only occur in SF.

True; and only because Dorcas is not (or does not appear to be) a timewalker is Severian prevented from singing the old convention favorite that ends "... I am my own grampaaaaw!"

If "a kind of adultery" refers to Cyriaca, well, I can't get too exercised about that, either.

Good heavens, I'd forgotten that. Skip "a kind of."

Nor rape if that refers to Jolenta, good grief! And fornication--since when do we start bleating about that? Yikes.

Since we are speaking of traditional Catholic sexual morality, that's since when. Not late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century American secular humanist morality. In which case the content of sin is not only intentional but formal; and my point is not whether Severian is "guilty"

(the issue of intention) of any or all of these things: it is that he formally does commit them, but somehow homosexuality seems to be left out of the mix.

Matthew Weber — 17 Sep 2002, 21:19 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

At 02:07 PM 9/17/02 -0700, you wrote:

As do I, regarding incest. And so what? Consider Oedipus. Incest appears to be so vile that even unknown, it pollutes the world.

Yet this is that world's savior ... go figure.

Yes, but the ethical/religious world of Sophocles isn't the same as that of Wolfe. In Sophocles (as in the Old Testament, come to think of it: cf. Uzziah and the Ark of the Covenant) it doesn't matter than Oedipus was an unknowing wrongdoer; he was guilty of patricide and incest, even if the former was self-defense and he had no idea he was committing the latter. Wolfe's sensibility is Christian: intent is more important than result, or at least as important.

Matthew Weber
Curatorial Assistant
Music Library
University of California, Berkeley

My father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.
The Holy Bible (The Old Testament): _The First Book of the Kings_, chapter 12, verse 11

James Wynn — 17 Sep 2002, 21:39 · follows Matthew Weber

Marc Arami suggested:

...or Pasicles, who may see in Latro the ideal victim (and whose continued sexual exploitation may be the source of Latro's deep depression at the end of ARETE, it being sensed but not remembered by our hero) Crush interjected: I was pretty sure that Pasicles never had his way with Latro, although he wanted to. He tried to "force his hand" and lost it. I don't think see any hint that he was successful after Latro's return from the North. Are there some things specifically you noted? Latro's depression was surely due to the death of his lover, the Amazon (whose name I can't remember right now).

Jerry Friedman deferred:

Don't mind me. I'd forgotten that incident and was believing Robert. I'll leave this one to people who have the book.

Crush responds:

Actually I was directing my question to all readers and participants of this thread. Important details in Wolfe's works frequently walk right under my nose (which is no surprise to some).

StoneOx17 — 18 Sep 2002, 14:07 · follows James Wynn

In a message dated 9/17/2002, matthew.malthouse at guardian.co.uk writes

On 13/09/2002 05:28:32 maa32 wrote:

Additionally, Mr. Borski has already elucidated on the strange preoccupation with circumcisions and various other repressed evidence of homosexual behavior.

What in hell connects circumcision with repressed evidence of homosexual behaviour?

You're parsing this incorrectly. It's not circumcision that's connected with homosexual behavior, it's strange preoccupation with it.

In Fifth Head of Cerberus, the teenage Victor serves as a guide for John Marsch in an expedition to the backcountry to search for abos. John Marsch writes in his journal about how he watches Victor bathing, and notes that he is uncircumcised. He also writes in the journal that he suspects that Victor is sneaking off to have sex with an abo girl, and that if he catches them, he will probably kill them both.

Altogether, this is generally taken as evidence for Marsch's homosexuality. (Although arguably, he might just be mad at Victor for withholding evidence that the abos really exist.) This was discussed in much more detail a while back in a thread called "uncut dogs."

SPOILERS AHEAD

It just occurred to me that this is why Victor killed Marsch. This murder is so obviously against Victor's self-interest -- Marsch serving as Victor's only conceivable ticket to a college education and a better life -- that I had assumed that he hadn't committed it, but that Marsch had been killed by a ghoul-bear (the near escape from which Victor later writes about in Marsch's diary). However, self-defense against rape is not only a plausible reason for murder, but beautifully parallels Number 5's murder of Maitre. Now, I'm going to have to reread 5HC to look for more evidence of this rape (which is probably very subtle, if it's there at all, since both Victor and Marsch have good reason not to mention it).

- Stone Ox