

PEACE as Faust

The Urth list — 9 messages, 5 voices, 04 Oct 2002

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StoneOx17 — 04 Oct 2002, 13:32

A while ago, I read Robert Borski's essay, "The Devil his Due," which makes the connection of Peace with Faust, and identifies Weer as the devil. I think that Borski often notices interesting things in Wolfe's writing, although he doesn't always draw the right conclusions from them, and I think that's the case here. I can't accept Weer as the devil, but the essay did lead me to think about identifying Julius with the devil, and that led me to an interesting interpretation of the banshee story, which I posted here a few weeks ago. Shortly after that, an image suddenly hit me that connects Peace to Faust. The image is the one at the end of many versions of Faust, with the devil dragging Faust down to hell as Margrete looks down from Heaven (or ascends to Heaven) and prays for him to be saved. The connection, of course, is to the end of the book, where, while Aunt Olivia calls Weer on the intercom, Weer makes the fatal error of looking to the enchanted headrest of the Chinese philosopher (and thus reliving his afterlife) rather than praying to Jesus for salvation. So we have the identification of Olivia with Margrete, and Weer with Faust. More on this identification later.

Is this really the right interpretation of the ending, leaving the ghost of Weer caught eternally in purgatory, while Olivia has ascended to heaven? It seems right to me, but I have only a few pieces of evidence for this:

First, when she's gathering information about the Chinese egg, Olivia convinces herself that, besides the Lorn's egg showing the scenes from the Resurrection, there is also a matching egg showing the Ascension, and she writes to a New York museum asking about it. A literal reading of this raises some bewildering questions (how does she draw this conclusion before she's even seen the egg?), but I believe this is intended to be read metaphorically: Weer has been resurrected as a ghost, but Olivia has not only been resurrected but has also subsequently ascended to heaven.

Next, at the end of the Chinese philosopher's story, we find the passage: "Fool!" the old man exclaimed. "Do you not recognize me? I have granted your heart's desire, and for it I receive your ingratitude!" Is this not also a plausible response to somebody who has turned down the offer of eternal life?

Finally, the end of Peace occurs right after Dan French's story of the geese of Loch Conn, which really should have served as a hint to Weer: "... And in time, men, too, will pass, as every man who lives long learns in his own body. But Jesus Christ saves all."

Thinking about it some more, I believe that there are multiple identifications of characters in Peace with those in Faust. We have to identify both Margaret and Olivia with Margrete, both Weer and Julius with Faust, and both Julius and Mr. Tilly with the devil. So we have Mr. Tilly passing his (carny) knowledge to Julius, who then passes the (secret?) formula for turning lead into gold (oops, I mean potatoes into imitation frozen orange juice) on to Weer. From Charles Turner's letter, it's not clear whether the carny medicines are really a benefit for their recipients. And as Borski notes, in the long run the factory certainly has an evil effect on the

surrounding farms.

-- Stone Ox

Roy C. Lackey — 04 Oct 2002, 19:27 · follows StoneOx17

Stone Ox writes:

Is this really the right interpretation of the ending, leaving the ghost of Weer caught eternally in purgatory, while Olivia has ascended to heaven?

I agree that Weer isn't El Diablo. But how is it that Olivia gets to go to heaven? She didn't strike me as even a nice person, much less as worthy of eternal reward. Before marriage she was a fornicator; afterwards an adulteress.

-Roy

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 04 Oct 2002, 20:40 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. wrote ...

I agree that Weer isn't El Diablo. But how is it that Olivia gets to go to heaven?

The usual method is called "repentance."

She didn't strike me as even a nice person, much less as worthy of eternal reward. Before marriage she was a fornicator; afterwards an adulteress.

Has nothing to do with the case -- the whole point (well, _a_ major point) of Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, is that _everyone_ is a sinner, but that doesn't stop you from being saved -- in fact it's why you need to be saved. And, because everyone's a sinner, nobody is "worse" than anyone else. So you just sort of have to accept what you are, be sorry for what you've done, and try to do better with God's help, and that's pretty much the deal. So being "not nice," "a fornicator," "an adulteress" (thank you for using these terms so accurately, btw) really wouldn't stop her. Might mean some Purgatory, but that's a highly-undefined term.

StoneOx17 — 05 Oct 2002, 14:45 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

blattid ("Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>) writes

Roy C. wrote ...

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And this also touches on the question of whether Weer gets into heaven. In his reminiscences, Weer hasn't even admitted some of his major sins--the cold room prank, whatever happened with Lois-- let alone repented of them.

--Stone Ox

Roy C. Lackey — 05 Oct 2002, 18:41 · follows StoneOx17

Blattid quoted and wrote:
Roy C. wrote ...

I agree that Weer isn't El Diablo. But how is it that Olivia gets to go to heaven?

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And the textual evidence for this is . . . nonexistent.

mantis also wrote:

P.S. Olivia an adultress? Roy, you surprise me again! I had not thought such a thing was in your no-nonsense reading of PEACE . . . I hesitate to even guess who the party or parties might be, nevermind the complicated ramifications. Please tell!

The following quote happens to address both Blattid's "repentance" issue and mantis's query. The context is the point in PEACE where Olivia interrupts Smart's Tilly tale to suggest it's time for Den to go to bed. It is the only place in the text where the subject of repentance and Olivia comes up, and it makes clear the depths of her sincerity and religiosity:

"My aunt Olivia was not serious. She belonged to that school which recognizes the just demands of duty by ritual observance, and had ordered me to bed in exactly the spirit in which she would later--when she was Mrs. Smart--repent three or four times a year of her casual connection with Professor Peacock and her occasional nights with Mr. Macafee." (145, Berkley)

And, of course, Den didn't go to bed then.

She didn't strike me as even a nice person, much less as worthy of eternal reward. Before marriage she was a fornicator; afterwards an adulteress.

Has nothing to do with the case -- the whole point (well, _a_ major point) of Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, is that _everyone_ is a sinner, but that doesn't stop you from being saved -- in fact it's why you need to be saved. And, because everyone's a sinner, nobody is "worse" than anyone else.

So, Herr Hitler and Mother Theresa were equal in God's eyes; what they did in their lives had no bearing on their eternal fate. Interesting. So long as Hitler had the presence of mind to say "I'm sorry" before he died in that bunker, St. Peter had no choice but to open up the Pearly Gates and let him in. I hope Mother Theresa wasn't caught unawares when she died, that she wasn't having a bad day, lest . . . but I digress.

And the "meritorious acts" ordered by an augur in the wake of a shriving counted for nothing. And Silk, observing Marble's joyful reaction to the working eye he brought her, and feeling warm and fuzzy about it himself, must have been suffering from one of Dr. Crane's cerebral accidents when he had the presumption to write of some day standing before his Maker: " . . . but if ever a time comes when I must justify my existence--when I must account for the space I have occupied, the food I have eaten, and the air I have breathed--I will tell about Maytera's eye first of all. I doubt that I will have to tell anything else." (RTTW, 307)

I don't want to get into another theological conflict; I cede you the high ground. But you can't tell me, so far as Wolfe's religious beliefs can be inferred from his work, that he believes the acts of an individual in life are not weighed in the final balance, regardless of technical conformity to Christian/Catholic dogma.

-Roy

James Jordan — 05 Oct 2002, 20:15 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Let me see if I've got you right:

At 08:32 AM 10/4/2002, Stone Ox wrote:

Shortly after that, an image suddenly hit me that connects Peace to Faust. The image is the one at the end of many versions of Faust, with the devil dragging Faust down to hell as Margrete looks down from Heaven (or ascends to Heaven) and prays for him to be saved. The connection, of course, is to the end of the book, where, while Aunt Olivia calls Weer on the intercom, Weer makes the fatal error of looking to the enchanted headrest of the Chinese philosopher (and thus reliving his afterlife) rather than praying to Jesus for salvation. So we have the identification of Olivia with Margrete, and Weer with Faust. More on this identification later.

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snip

Next, at the end of the Chinese philosopher's story, we find the passage:

"Fool!" the old man exclaimed. "Do you not recognize me? I have granted your heart's desire, and for it I receive your ingratitude!"

Is this not also a plausible response to somebody who has turned down the offer of eternal life?

So, tell me: Weer is Faust. He has been granted his heart's desire for an eternal life, and he has it. He is doomed to walk through his life over and over forever. He's not in purgatory, but hell. Is that it?

Nutria

Michael Andre-Driussi — 05 Oct 2002, 20:03 · follows James Jordan

Re: Olivia the adultress, ach -- that couch! Of course, how could I have forgotten that couch. Apologies to Roy.

=mantis=

StoneOx17 — 07 Oct 2002, 13:19 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Nutria wrote

Let me see if I've got you right:

At 08:32 AM 10/4/2002, Stone Ox wrote:

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Essentially, that's it. I left out the next line in the Chinese philosopher's story, which is: "And with that he [the old man] picked up the teakettle and dashed the boiling contents into the face of the young man ..."; this could symbolize the casting of the young man into hell.

There are some things I am quite certain of: I believe that Weer would have had a genuine chance to ascend to heaven if he had understood the significance of the Irish story of the geese. I also believe that at the end of the book, he returns to relive his afterlife, as in the Chinese pillow story.

I

am less certain of this, but I think the second and subsequent times, he is in hell rather than purgatory, although it may be that these times, he still has a chance to repent of his sins and reach heaven, but given that he didn't do this the previous times, he becomes less and less likely to in subsequent rounds. As Robert Borski observed, Gold writes, in Morryster's *Marvells of Science*, "Heaven ... (like Hell) repeats itself over and over again, always different and yet always the same." This is somewhat similar to Sartre's "Huis Clos," where hell is a room with three people in it, the door to which is open exactly when none of the three people want to leave.

In a different posting, Roy C. quoted and wrote ...

Blattid quoted and wrote:

Roy C. wrote ...

I agree that Weer isn't El Diablo. But how is it that Olivia gets to go to heaven?

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Well, very thin. First, I firmly believe that Weer had a genuine opportunity to reach heaven, and I don't think Olivia's sins are any worse than Weer's. Second, there is the point that Aunt Olivia is looking for the ascension egg. In Christian theology, looking is half the battle: "Seek, and ye shall find." Finally, there's the parallel with Faust, and the question of where at the end, Olivia is speaking to him from (if her voice isn't yet another spectre conjured from Weer's imagination). I do agree with Roy that it's very unlikely that Olivia died in a state of grace, so she would have had to spend some time as a ghost in Purgatory, as well, but I see no reason she shouldn't have repented of her sins there.

--Stone Ox

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Oct 2002, 15:43 · follows StoneOx17

Off topic, but not totally; it goes to the purgatorial interpretation of PEACE...

Roy C. wrote:

I don't want to get into another theological conflict; I cede you the high ground. But you can't tell me, so far as Wolfe's religious beliefs can be inferred from his work, that he believes the acts of an individual in life are not weighed in the final balance, regardless of technical conformity to Christian/Catholic dogma.

Nor do I want for a moment to get into any such theological conflict. And I certainly don't want to suggest that anything less than the whole life of the individual would be involved in that individual's Eternal destiny. Your example of Hitler having "the presence of mind to say 'I'm sorry' before he died in that bunker" is a classic case: theoretically, technically possible -- though extremely unlikely in the case of someone who is dying in the manner Hitler did -- but simply saying "I'm sorry" isn't the point; it would take a moment of genuine conversion, of actually recognizing the horror of what he'd done and hating it. Which is a lot to happen in the

moment between the pulling of the trigger and the bullet's smashing his brains out ... but that bare possibility is a large part of why Catholicism embraces the concept of _purgatory_, the idea that, well, yes, you may well be saved from Hell, but you still have a lot of cleaning up (literally; purging) to do, and it may not feel very nice. Somehow it becomes necessary to encompass both the idea that God is absolutely just and the idea that God is merciful.

(Contrariwise, the bit about Mother Teresa having "a bad day" wouldn't make much difference; maybe a tiny bit of extra purgation.)

Regarding Olivia's repeated repentances ... well, I honestly don't know. I can't judge a real person I know well; how can I judge a fictional character I know only through an unreliable narrator?