

PEACE: Olivia's courtship stories

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Oct 2002

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 21 Oct 2002, 04:48

At Macafee's 41st birthday party, Olivia tells the China Pillow story. We've talked about this at length, but now I see two distinct readings. The personal message to Macafee seems to be something like "I offered you myself but you chose the artifact; you will regret your choice for the rest of your life" (I think we've talked about that before). The larger message, the one that echoes more clearly throughout the novel, is something like this:

The young person entering adulthood sees a daunting array of obstacles, is fearful of the hardships ahead, fearful of the unknown, and full of hope for reward. Given a happy reality via the magic pillow, the young person overcomes all the difficulties and rises higher than ever dreamt, and still, as an old person, the same individual would like to live that one day over again when the path was all before rather than behind.

The story at first seems to be a "sour grapes" or "can't win" sort of tale (where human nature is such that happiness is denied everyone, ultimately: like the Grimm's tale [iirc] of the Fisherman's Wife, who isn't happy even as the Pope), because the philosopher chides the man and splashes hot water in his face. But I sense something else, since the young man picks himself up and continues on to Peking. He has had a vision of his future and he is carrying on, possibly to fulfill it. And also there seems to be a gentle understanding that the young person's fears and hopes are balanced by the older person's nostalgia for that same moment: neither one is to be condemned, really.

Smart responds with his Tale of Mr. Tilly. I think its personal message to Olivia is something like this:

Smart is himself the hero of Olivia's tale, the young man on his way up (in contrast to the other suitors, who are all established and settled in their places); the man with the vision (dreamy orange alchemy vision), unafraid of the obstacles ahead. Smart's "philosopher" was the alchemist Tilly, and Smart has learned some magic from looking over his formulas -- something involving oranges that "may make folks sit up and take notice one day (Berkley p. 127).

So, Olivia chooses Smart. But then she starts morphing, and when she commits adultery with Macafee in front of the Chinese egg, she is herself trying to return to the day of Macafee's 41st birthday. The irony is that she is the one who, for whatever reason, regrets the choice she made -- the hex she cast on Macafee has bounced onto her. And the egg has become the pillow, as it were.

=mantis=

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