

PEACE: trolls and troglodytes

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 28 Oct 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3517>

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StoneOx17 — 28 Oct 2002, 01:59

Inspired by mantis's identification of Santa Claus as the switcher of the presents, I reread the section of Peace containing Christmas at Grandfather's. I am inclined to agree that Santa Claus switched the pearls and the toilet water, but still think the stories in the books were switched only in Weer's memory, as I contend the three Irish stories have also been similarly switched (although I admit I don't understand how the St. Brandon story reflects in the book at all).

That's not my main reason for this posting, though. I noticed the following line:

"... trolls (of whose existence I remained convinced for years after this visit, as I remained, for that matter, convinced of the reality of Santa Claus)."

So, if Santa Claus is real, then trolls presumably are as well. We already have a candidate. From mantis' "scattered notes" on Peace, we have

6) Weer's dream last night of age 25 in the Chinese garden.
The dead bird= Olivia, the toppled troll = Peacock; both dead by
time Weer is 25. Dream like the china pillow story in style
(the wall and the plain) and in reality (old man Weer revisiting
young Weer's situation).

Prof. Peacock certainly has some trollish properties. He is associated with caves, as he finds the cave with the skull and also he proposes to Aunt Olivia that they "'live like the troglodytes known to classical writers' and 'to Montesquieu' ". Could Aunt Olivia have been killed while in some sense on a bridge (or is crossing a street somehow a modern correlate)? Did Prof. Peacock die by being turned to stone?

And finally, and I think most exciting, I found the troglodytes "known to Montesquieu" that Prof. Peacock mentioned. Did anybody think of looking for them before? ... It would have been a lot harder before the web. Anyway, they can be found in letters 11 and 12 of Montesquieu's "Persian Letters" (Lettres persanes). To me, they seem quite clearly relevant for Peace. These two letters are quite short, and it's impossible for me to do them justice with a summary, so I'll simply give the URL, and say that if these are indeed the trolls Wolfe is talking about, then they are in a sense real, and Prof. Peacock appears to be is one of their number. The URL I found is: <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Montesquieu%20-%20Letters.htm>

--Stone Ox

Roy C. Lackey — 28 Oct 2002, 08:10 · follows StoneOx17

Stone Ox wrote:

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And finally, and I think most exciting, I found the troglodytes "known to Montesquieu" that Prof. Peacock mentioned. Did anybody think of looking for them before? ...

No, I don't recall that anyone has. Great find!

The two "letters" might be summed up as pointing the moral that "virtue is its own reward" (as regards the original question addressed in the letters). However, I have trouble associating Peacock with the selfish troglodytes. The sentence which contains that quote begins, "Professor Peacock--that lean, good-natured man . . ." I always thought he was the best choice among the three original suitors, even though the poorest. He would never be rich as a teacher, which seems to me the major strike against him, in Olivia's eyes, though he was closest to her own age and shared a common intellectual background lacking in the other two. Had Wolfe not named him as her killer, I would never have thought it of him. That he did kill her seems to exclude him from the idyllic second generation of trogs encountered in the second letter.

That sentence I mentioned is one of those long, convoluted ones Wolfe uses from time to time. Those kinds of sentences are always hard to puzzle out. The ending of that one has always bugged me: ". . . save when some new arrival, some promising new member of the faculty, was at table and the future of the whole establishment turned, as upon less than a hair, on his judgement--when they would have roast pork and dressing, particularly if it was July." Why July? In the first quarter of the last century food distribution and preservation was nothing like today, when all sorts of things may be had out of season. While smoked pork products might be found year-round in rural areas then, hog-slaughtering time was, and remains, primarily in the autumn. Wolfe knows this: it was one of the ways Severian marked the turning of the seasons when he was a boy, iirc, by fresh pork appearing on his plate. I don't understand what Wolfe was saying here.

-Roy

Michael Andre-Driussi — 28 Oct 2002, 15:41 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Thanks to Stone Ox for pointing us toward an online version of PERSIAN LETTERS.

The section under discussion does not give, imho, an accurate sense of what that novel is about. IIRC, it is about a Persian travelling in Europe, told through his letters to friends in Persia describing his adventures in the exotic West, and letters from his friends to him. As might be guessed from such a set up, beneath the travelogue it is a satire of French institutions, customs, etc.

I read PERSIAN LETTERS around 15 years ago and have not looked at it since. (I regret not adding more to the "Montesquieu" entry in the "PEACE Indexicon": even though space was getting tight, I really could/should have added the novel's title. I wrote it into my personally annotated copy and encourage others to do the same.) Without looking again at the text I had supposed that the troglodytes were a European group, but they are not. So the section by itself reads like a straight entry from Pliny the Elder's natural history.

PERSIAN LETTERS has a more immediately direct link to Wolfe's "Seven American Nights," I think, where the hero is a Persian travelling in the former USA.

Stone Ox wrote:

Prof. Peacock certainly has some trollish properties. He is associated with caves, as he finds the cave with the skull and also he proposes to Aunt Olivia that they "'live like the troglodytes known to classical writers' and 'to Montesquieu' ". Could Aunt Olivia have been killed while in some sense on a bridge (or is crossing a street somehow a modern correlate)? Did Prof. Peacock die by being turned to stone?

There is also the gnome suitor in the green book story.

I think the bridge is there in the Chinese garden dream because trolls are often depicted as living under bridges.

=mantis=

Mark Millman — 28 Oct 2002, 16:25 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Roy,

Wolfe is saying that Peacock would have been indulging in conspicuous consumption so as to impress the visiting faculty member. A digression is in order here: During the nineteenth century, enterprising vendors in large cities customarily set up booths along the main streets on Independence Day, at which they would sell roast suckling pig. There are contemporary descriptions of the aroma of roast pork floating over Manhattan while booths lined all of Broadway. Roast pork in July would be both festive and, for an individual in Peacock's financial position, likely to be a significant expenditure--the vendors in the cities were often farmers who were willing to spare a pig for the anticipated profits, but Peacock might have to pay a considerable sum to get one from a local farmer for his own use (especially if the sucklings had already been culled for the Fourth), and--since Olivia doesn't cook --to have it prepared in suitable style. These pork dinners might be among the couple's few luxuries--Peacock is, after all, envisaging them as troglodytes in this passage (page 45 of the hardcover and Orb trade; 43 of the Berkeley paperback)--but they would clearly have come at some cost, both in money and in stress.

Mark Millman

On Mon, 28 Oct 2002, Roy C. Lackey wrote:
[snip]

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ture of the whole establishment turned, as upon less than a hair, on his judgment--when they would have roast pork and dressing, particularly if it was July." Why July? In the first quarter of the last century food distribution and preservation was nothing like today, when all sorts of things may be had out of season. While smoked pork products might be found year-round in rural areas then, hog-slaughtering time was, and remains, primarily in the autumn. Wolfe knows this: it was one of the ways Severian marked the turning of the seasons when he was a boy, iirc, by fresh pork appearing on his plate. I don't understand what Wolfe was saying here.

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 28 Oct 2002, 20:38 · follows Mark Millman

Mark Millman wrote:
Wolfe is saying that Peacock would have been indulging in conspicuous consumption so as to impress the visiting faculty member.

Thanks, Mark.

-Roy

Adam Stephanides — 07 Nov 2002, 23:36 · follows Roy C. Lackey

on 10/28/02 10:25 AM, Mark Millman at millman at heimdallr.dyndns.org wrote:
Roy,

Wolfe is saying that Peacock would have been indulging in conspicuous consumption so as to impress the visiting faculty member.

Not quite. The key line is "the future of the whole establishment turned, as upon less than a hair, on his judgment." (45, hc) It is not Peacock, but the proprietor of the boarding house who will serve roast pork; the "new member of the faculty" is not just visiting, but considering taking a room at the house, and the purpose of the pork is not merely to impress him, but to mislead him into thinking pork is regularly on the menu.

--Adam