

5HC: Number Five and Number Three

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 23 Nov 2002

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StoneOx17 — 23 Nov 2002, 16:47

The very interesting thread about identity started me thinking, and I think I may have an answer to a puzzle in 5HC.

The puzzle, which I have never been satisfied with the resolution of, is why the narrator is called Number Five. Aunt Jeannine seems to think that Maitre is counting living descendants (exclusive of slaves), namely: Mr. Million, Jeannine, Maitre, David, and the narrator. This has never seemed to me a completely satisfactory explanation, and I have just now come up with another one.

What did the narrator's grandfather call the narrator's father? I'm going to propose that he called him "Number Three." The grandfather meant by this that Number Three was the third in the line of clones on St. Croix. But in his childhood, Number Three assumed that his father was counting himself as Number One and sister Jeannine as Number Two. When it came time to give a nickname to the narrator, Maitre (who by that time had undoubtedly figured out the true derivation of his nickname) somewhat whimsically continued this count, labelling David as Number Four, and the narrator as Number Five.

Incidentally, figuring out what to call all the characters in the above paragraph without being confusing was quite difficult (and I may not have succeeded). Saying "his father" is ambiguous, since it's not always clear who "his" refers to; "Maitre" isn't entirely satisfactory, since in Maitre's childhood, Maitre's father was called Maitre; and using names isn't useful since they all are named Gene Wolfe.

Let me also use this post to correct a related misapprehension. Some people (I forget who) have assumed that Mr. Million is our Gene Wolfe, the author. But Aunt Jeannine's response on learning Number Five's nickname -- "That number's either far too low or too high." -- makes it clear that our Gene Wolfe was the progenitor of a long line of clones who remained on Earth for many generations before one of them (later to become Mr. Million) decided he would rather be a big fish in a small pond and emigrated to St. Croix.

-- Stone Ox