

exhaustion of the feminine

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maa32 — 25 Nov 2002, 14:21

In a previous post, Don asserted that he sees little need for Dorcas to be a familial relation of Severian's. I argue that it is imperative that she be a member of his line: her love is a distorted version of motherly love that is the most redeeming love in the text outside of divinity.

I argue that, as Gene Wolfe has stated, in some small part the story of Severian is the story of a man looking for love. I think that Wolfe is a careful enough writer to show that these females (whatever you think of them) are symbolic of something other than themselves. In the text, first you have an ideal of beauty that you covet (Thea), then you have the prostitute - the easiest form of "love" for a young boy to get with a little cash - that mirrors a desire (that mirrors another desire).

Then you have a wiser, older mentor (Thecla). Then the femme fatale in the form of Agia - conniving, plain outside and ugly inside - then you have the most redeeming love of the text - one that must be explored in the same sexual metaphor that Wolfe uses to explore all the others - the most versatile form of love (note the changing flowers in Dorcas' hair - she is the only one who can change her flowers if we associate Thecla with the death lillies and Agia with the Avern) - that of the mother figure. It is a tension between sexual desire and the need to be protected from the external environment - and notice how Dorcas changes Sev's perceptions of the outside world by having him feel her up, presenting him with the archetypal symbol of safety - the breast. That's pretty motherly. Then we have false vanity, teasing, and uppitiness (Jolenta). Later we get an exploration of adultery (Cyriaca), then an exploration of slavery/bondage in the form of Pia, and perhaps one of buggery with little Sev. (but probably not) Finally this culminates in frigid, banal marriage with a haughty wench that leaves everybody feeling bad, so one might as well go to the stars to be castrated.

In many ways, the text is an exhaustion of the possibilities of happiness through either feminine spirituality or sexuality (you've noticed all those evil feminine goddesses and cults lurking in the text, Don). Love, to a young man, might seem to be best embodied by someone in the image of his mother, but even that should be shunned for something a bit more redemptive and spiritual, as Severian ultimately does. I think Dorcas needs to be maternal, and Severian's symbolic incest is not contrary to Wolfe's intentions, for the thematic consistency of the book relies on all of these various roles offering nothing but a vacuous relief from lust and desire in the form of a grasping, new hatched chick hungry to devour the world. (At least, I think so).

Marc Aramini