

Quetzal On Urth? (allegory?)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 27 Nov 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3621>

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James Wynn — 27 Nov 2002, 16:55

Allegory, typology, or symbolism? Let me explain...

Charles said:

Well, I don't see it that way, though I'll grant that this is a matter of interpretation. Quetzal identifies himself with the cobra in the sense that he's trying to lure A-man and Wo-man from the garden (the Whorl) up into his tree (Green) by doing everything possible to carry out the Plan of Pas. My interpretation differs from yours in that you see Urth, rather than the Whorl, as "the garden." Each interpretation's validity depends on the point of view. Yours is valid if Quetzal was on Urth, which I do not believe him to have been.

Crush responds:

I'm afraid I don't agree that your interpretation is feasible. Quetzal says that the cobra lured A-man and Wo-man into his tree, BUT (at the time of LS3:1) they *had not yet climbed down*. This means that the cobra had *already* lured them into his tree. The next part of the story was when they climbed down. Now Quetzal is engaging in allegory here, but I don't consider it very difficult to understand: Since A-man and Wo-man have already climbed the "tree", the "tree" is the Whorl which took them off the Urth. Since A-man and Wo-man have yet to "climb down," then "climbing down" is disembarking to Green. If I could accept your interpretation, it would make many things easier, but, alas, the interpretation does not follow the allegory.

Charles said:

Allusion *enhances* the work and provides the reader with perhaps a greater depth of understanding, but if the reader MUST understand the allusions in order to understand the story, then the story isn't really a story -- it's an allegory. That's not what the NS/LS/SS books are, though.

Crush responds:

Yes and no. FOR EXAMPLE, Christians have always read the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac as a deliberate picture (set up by God) of what he would do when the Messiah came. That doesn't mean they don't believe Abraham saw it as being all about his own spiritual journey nor do they intend that God's motives in the event had nothing to do His concern for Abraham personally (i.e. that Abraham was a rat in a maze). This is not allegory, it's typology. But -- consistently in my experience -- people who read the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac as pure anecdote or as a fable with a moral, come away saying, "God's motives make no sense here". That's a feeling I can relate to when I read the Sun cycle.

Through my own **investigation**, I have realized that one of Wolfe's interests in the LS/SS was to play with serpent imagery (especially flying serpent imagery) in myth and alchemy. I believe this was the *beginning* of his working of the LS narrative..

"Look", he said, "Flying serpents in Herodotus, flying serpents in Mesoamerica, flying serpents in alchemy, flying serpents in

the Bible. The serpent in the garden is a fallen angel, an angel is a seraphim which is a flying serpent. Typhon is a serpent too. Osiris was killed by Typhon-Set. Apollo had his Python. Don't forget the horned snakes in Herodotus, and Dionysus had a snake epiphany and was horned. Moses had a snake and was horned. And Moses is associate by some with Dionysus through Mt. Horeb. Moses and Alexander were called the two-horned ones. Hey! And there's an Indian story of King Midas where he grows horns instead of horse ears - and a tamarind tree is at the center of that story. Now lets take a look at that story of Midas and Silenus (Dionysus' teacher)..."

You imagine the imagery was pasted over the story. My investigation has convinced me that the story flowered FROM the imagery. He didn't even (as I might have done) grow the story from a mere kernel of a myth story or image. Based on the imagery Wolfe is working with, there is an actual reason why Wolfe left Quetzal's origination mysterious. I am continuously amazed at how elaborately the story is founded. But the NAMES are deliberate clues. After the BotNS, Wolfe's readers are sufficiently warned that the words and names of his characters are carefully and deliberately chosen - that's an element of allegory. Wolfe should not be blamed if the reader says, "There's something going on here but I don't know what it is", if the reader hasn't bothered to open the myriad of golden eggs Wolfe has left lying around.

The genius of Wolfe is that he wove all these images into a self-consistent narrative with enough quirkiness to invite the reader to delve deeper. Like Gwydion's poem in the Mabinogion (as interpreted by Graves in "The White Goddess"), the LS/SS is a puzzle inviting the reader to work it out in the same way Graves did. Graves even has a chapter in his book called "The Spiral Staircase".

The names and words in the LS/SS are a map to help the reader put the ka-jillion narrative clues into a perspective and understand how they relate together.

Now to address a side issue....

Charles said (and Blattid assented):

But as far as basing/dispensing theories on the "Wolfe wouldn't do that" argument -- I think this is extremely dangerous. Just this week, there was an exchange in which Don Doggett stated, "I cannot believe that Wolfe would have his main character commit incest, knowingly or unknowingly, and especially without any good reason" and outlined a theory for why he didn't think Dorcas was Severian's grandmother. Marc Aramani then replied, in what I thought was really good argument which summarized the various sexual relationships in the NS books, that it was in fact essential to his interpretation that Dorcas be Severian's grandmother. "Wolfe wouldn't do that" is simply a bad way to argue a point.

Actually, I have no interest in encouraging this sort of argument (I've never used it). But don't make me go through the archives and uncover every instance of it in the last few months ("Wolfe is too orthodox for that", "Wolfe would never have a moral exemplar do such and such"). I don't remember you guys making this argument but it *has been made* by posters with more knowledge of Wolfe and greater posting history than mine.

Yet, at some point in every reader's life, he will read something and say, "that doesn't sound like Shakespeare". It's not *necessarily* wrong to say a theory on tone or theme is not keeping with the writing history of a writer. But, of course, whenever you assert that, there is at least

one person who thought it was very much it sounded like that writer. So travelers beware.

-- Crush

James Jordan — 27 Nov 2002, 17:36 · follows James Wynn

At 10:55 AM 11/27/2002, you wrote:
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Nutria rejoinds:

Makes sense, but I don't think its the only way to read it. You're right I think that serpents are all over these books, and deliberately so. But surely Scylla is a serpent also? The title of the chapter is "The Slaves of Scylla." Is that what Quetzal is? In that case, going with your allegory, it was Scylla who helped or had Typhon build the whorl. It is Scylla's tree. In the chapter, Quetzal's own tree is of recent planting.

I'm thinking that the notion that that the inhumi are slaves of Scylla may open some new avenues of investigation....

Try this: Scylla wanted the Whorl to deposit its people on Blue, where she ruled. Quetzal has his own plan, to get them to his own tree: Green. On Blue, inhumi are slaves of Scylla, like everyone else. A return to Green, to Quetzal's tree, is "the highroad to freedom." Freedom from what? From being a slave of Scylla?

I'm just playing with possibilities here.

Nutria