

Get a bigger hammer

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 23 Dec 2002

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Roy C. Lackey — 23 Dec 2002, 08:27

Chris wrote:

The second possibility is to, as a reader, come up with a reading of the text that is as aesthetically pleasing (to you) as you can. In this sense we are in some way pushing each other to come up with more beautiful interpretations in consistency, form, and symmetry among other things - and in this context, what the author *meant* has little if anything to do with matters.

I cannot agree. Authorial intent is not to be dismissed so casually. Propagandists of one stripe or another have historically cited respected, even revered, sources in support of their cause. The Bible is a good example. Verses can be (and have been) quoted from it that would seem to justify a whole host of evils, from slavery to war to genocide. The Nazis quoted Nietzsche. Madison and Jefferson are often cited in church/state debates by atheists and believers alike as authorities in support of opposing agenda. Authorial intent, where it can be discerned, has everything to do with it. Quotes out of context and those that are not representative of the whole distort the meaning of the work.

Granted, readers may discover more in a given work than the author was consciously aware of having included, but those findings, even if they are textually viable, may not belie the internal logic of the work or subvert the author's conscious intent. Authors, especially good authors, are often surprised, not always pleasantly, by the things readers find in their work that they never thought to put in it. Such findings tend to be harmless if the story was well written in the first place; that is, if authorial intent is not compromised by such a reading. Nutria has, in the past, stated rather dogmatically that Wolfe--the man, the Christian, the whatever--would never put this or that in his books, where the character espousing this or that could be taken as representative of Wolfe's view. I tend to agree. If Wolfe has a character killing babies in a story, you can bet that character is a bad guy, and Wolfe isn't a bad guy.

IIRC, Dan'I, some months back, wrote something to the effect that not all readings are equal, by which he meant that some readings just can't be justified by the text. Such readings say more about the reader than the writer. There seems to me to be an attempt by some to pound Wolfe's round texts into the square holes of external models. Such readers see, or think they see, similarities in Wolfe's fiction to other things they have read. Sure, Wolfe doesn't write in a vacuum. Any well-read reader can see influences--stylistic, thematic, or what have you--in Wolfe's work. It's obvious that Wolfe has read some history, mythology, religion, science, etc., as well as the work of other authors, in and out of the genre. But Wolfe is his own man. He may borrow ideas from others, but he doesn't rewrite others' work. He isn't Vance, or Baum, or Graves, or Proust, or God; he's just on familiar terms with them.

Mantis has sought in vain for the original sources of the embedded stories in PEACE. The stories seem so familiar to readers of Burton or Lang or whomever, that it seems almost as if we have read them before. But he can't find them because they don't exist, not quite. He can find stories like them, but not entirely the same. Even Cinderella is twisted. I have likewise shown that the

Sidhe story is a distortion of another Celtic folktale. Wolfe recast them all to serve his own ends. I believe that the same is true for other detectable influences. A one-for-one correlation between Wolfe's work and any external model just isn't going to be found, because he doesn't write that way.

Severian isn't Jesus, despite demonstrable similarities in their stories. Silk isn't Moses; hell, he actually got to the promised land. North isn't G. Gordon Liddy. The resemblance of CASTLEVIEW to the Arthurian cycle isn't very deep. The list can be expanded, but the result remains the same; attempts to force what Wolfe actually wrote to fit an external model won't work, and using a bigger hammer won't make it so.

Some readers see what they want to see and disregard anything in the text that is not convenient to their theories as attributable to opinionated but ignorant characters or disingenuous narrators, even when said individuals are the authors of the entire text, including those parts on which their theories were founded. What's worse, some of those mouthpieces are wrong, for whatever reason. Deciding what is textually true and what is not then becomes an exercise in belief or reason, and those two remain poor bedfellows.

Chris - wondering if "Cheese" is a valid Vironese name.

I dunno, but with alga's pet Rat on the list, I'd think twice about it. <g>

-Roy

Chris — 23 Dec 2002, 17:35 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy: I don't disagree with a lot of what you've said, so I won't go point by point. What I feel you've overlooked, though, is that I mentioned **two** types of interpretation, of which you are looking at the second. The **first** is the one that is concerned with authorial intent, and can be the source of misinterpretation of the author.

The second, as I presented it, should never be employed with **any** pretension of being able to present what the author actually meant. It is commonly used in cases where the text simply can't be "decoded" using the material at hand. I see it often used with Wolfe - though quite often incorrectly, where someone has conflated the two methods and, like you describe, got it into their head that what they think sounds good **must** be what Wolfe meant. But perhaps a better example of what I'm talking about would be the Art of War, or even better the I Ching. These texts are renowned for their ability to be interpreted distinctly out of context - and yet still yield readings that are often applicable to a vast variety of things. The author's intent is cast aside quite early in that process.

Chris

(Point taken on the cheese)

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