

New Wolfe online

The Urth list — 9 messages, 7 voices, 06 Feb 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3830>

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 06 Feb 2003, 23:36

There's a new (posted yesterday) Wolfe story, "Castaway,"=20 on scifi.com:

http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/wolfe2/

No spoilers, but I think it's one of the best (and most comprehensible) Wolfe pieces I've read in a while. It might also offer some ammo for one of the dimensions=20 of the ongoing (though currently in abeyance) discussion of Short Sun...

Enjoy!

Nigel Price — 07 Feb 2003, 00:54 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Blattid wrote...

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"Castaway," on scifi.com:

http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/wolfe2/

No spoilers...<snip>

You're right, it is a good story, but there are - inevitably - still things that I'm not sure about. Is it OK if I go ahead and ask a question, provided I write...

S P O I L E R

...in nice big letters?

OK, here goes.

Don't read this if you're liable to spoil your enjoyment of a good story!

When the narrator asks the castaway...

I said about the woman that had been dirtside
with him, was she still alive when we took him
off, because he'd said how sick she was, and I
thought he wouldn't go off and leave her.

...I'm assuming that the woman is the tutelary spirit of the planet, the genius loci, and that there's at least a possibility that the planet may be Earth. The woman is sick because the planet is blighted and decayed, and now mostly frozen, although once it bore abundant life (birds, trees).

The fact that the day is shorter by half an hour than it once was indicates - what? That the planet's rotation has speeded up? What's the significance of that?

Anyway, the castaway's answer to the question about whether the woman was alive when he left is as follows....

"She was and she wasn't," he said. "There were things inside her, eating the corpse. Does that count?" I said no, of course not, for it to count they would have to have been part of her. "They were," he said, and that was the real end of it. Only he turned to go, and I wanted to walk with him at least 'til he got to the lock. Which I did. And talking to himself I heard him say, "She had been so beautiful. Just so damned beautiful."

So: what are "things inside her, eating the corpse"? Worms eat corpses, but what eats a planet, literally or metaphorically? And what does it mean that the things were "part of her"?

Are we to read that the things inside the planet are humans in underground shelters, having killed off the planet by waging nuclear war which precipitated a nuclear winter? The humans are part of the ecosystem or "Gaia" model and therefore "part of" the woman?

Or am I being too literal? Is it just that the planet is decayed because its erstwhile inhabitants "fell" and therefore ensured that their whole environment was "damned"? The woman was, after all, specifically described as "damned beautiful"? The planet might therefore be considered to contain the seeds of her own destruction or some such?

I'm still not sure and would value suggestions!

Nigel

Robert Davis — 07 Feb 2003, 11:45 · follows Nigel Price

At 07:54 PM 2/6/2003, you wrote:

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Old, buried nuclear waste products would be my guess.

Charles Reed — 07 Feb 2003, 15:23 · follows Robert Davis

Hello everyone. I read "Castaway" a couple of times and thought I'd offer up some thoughts, and try a stab at answering some of Nigel's questions. First, some observations:

I'm not sure why, but this story reminded me a little bit of "The Rime of Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge. Maybe "reminded" is too strong a word. Rather, I heard faint echoes of the poem in the story. Did anybody else hear similar echoes?

For example, the mariner in the poem was doomed to repeat his tale as a warning to others, while the narrator of the story feels compelled to tell his story about the castaway so that he can stop thinking about him. That is, both tale-tellers suffer from a compulsion to tell their tale (as do all tale-tellers, I suppose).

Also, in the poem there was that bit about the mariner holding the wedding guest with his hand, then with his eye, which sort-of echoes the part in the story about the castaway grabbing the

narrator's wrist "like a vice" when he gave that little speech about how they could have "saved her" if they had wanted to. Which, in turn, kind-of echoes the idea of how the mariner could have saved the albatross (by not shooting it) if he had wanted to. That's kind-of reaching, I know.

But there's also another echo. Compare the poem: "The many men, so beautiful! / And they all dead did lie: / And a thousand thousand slimy things / Lived on ; and so did I./ . . . /The very deep did rot : O Christ ! / That ever this should be! / Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea." It's the image of something dead (the becalmed sea) being consumed from within, as in the story: ". . . was she still alive when we took him off, because he'd said how sick she was, and I thought he wouldn't go off and leave her. /// He sort of smiled. I never had seen a smile like that before, and I don't ever want to see another one. "She was and she wasn't," he said. "There were things inside her, eating the corpse. Does that count?" /// I said no, of course not, for it to count they would have to have been part of her. /// "They were," he said, and that was the real end of it."

And, of course, there's the obvious similarity between the mariner and the castaway being the only beings left alive aboard a doomed ship/planet and having to deal with the various ghosts and spirits being called forth.

Well, so much for that. Now let me try the questions: Nigel asked:

The fact that the day is shorter by half an hour than it once was indicates - what? That the planet's rotation has speeded up? What's the significance of that?

According to an article on www.faqs.org (the astronomy archive), "Prior to forming a planetary nebula, a low-mass star (i.e., one with a mass similar to that of the Sun) forms a red giant. Planets close to the star are engulfed in the expanding star, spiral inside it, and are destroyed. In our own solar system, Mercury and Venus are doomed. . . . When a star enters the red giant phase, the rate at which it loses mass can accelerate. The mass of a star determines how far a planet orbits from it. Thus, as the Sun loses mass, the orbits of the other planets will expand. The orbit of Mars will almost certainly expand faster than the Sun does, thus Mars will probably not suffer the same fate as Mercury and Venus. It is currently an open question as to whether the Earth will survive or be engulfed."

So the answer to the question is that the Earth in the story (assuming that it is Earth) is spiraling into the sun along with Mercury and Venus, therefore speeding up its rotation.

So: what are "things inside her, eating the corpse"? Worms eat corpses, but what eats a planet, literally or metaphorically? And what does it mean that the things were "part of her"?

Are we to read that the things inside the planet are humans in underground shelters, having killed off the planet by waging nuclear war which precipitated a nuclear winter? The humans are part of the ecosystem or "Gaia" model and therefore "part of" the woman?

I think the Coleridge stuff I talked about earlier addresses these questions. I don't see any evidence to conclude that there are humans living "inside her" or that the planet is experiencing a "nuclear winter."

Two questions of my own:

1) The castaway says, "We could have saved her. Earlier. We could have made her young again. We could have taken her away. We could have done it. Nothing stopping us." But later on he says, "But it was all over for her, and she knew it. We never wanted to help her. We never wanted to save her, and now we couldn't if we wanted to. It's too late. Too late ..." So. How could she have been saved? How much earlier is he talking about? Is he talking about a future Earth (or Urth) where the New Sun doesn't come, and is the New Sun the way she could have been saved?

2) Who was the real castaway, the man or the planet?

Charles

P.S. Does anybody know how to get back on the mailing list? I put it on holiday mode about three months ago, and now can't seem to turn it off, even though I've followed all the directions in the "Complete Instructions" and have even tried re-subscribing. All to no effect. Any ideas?

cilluff1 at optonline.net — 07 Feb 2003, 16:10 · follows Charles Reed

Charles Reed wrote:

<<1) The castaway says, "We could have saved her. Earlier. We could have made her young again. We could have taken her away. We could have done it. Nothing stopping us." But later on he says, "But it was all over for her, and she knew it. We never wanted to help her. We never wanted to save her, and now we couldn't if we wanted to. It's too late. Too late ..." So. How could she have been saved? How much earlier is he talking about? Is he talking about a future Earth (or Urth) where the New Sun doesn't come, and is the New Sun the way she could have been saved?>>

Although of course there's always the temptation to try to place any Wolfe work in an Urth context (and I also wondered if this was Urth, although I thought that if this was Urth it was post New Sun, that we had repeated the cycle, although I do like your "alternate history" theory), I finally thought that this was a (mostly) straight-forward allegory about treating Gaia, Mother Earth, properly. We could have saved her by acting with more forethought instead of repeating the tragedy of the commons on a global scale.

As for the "underground humans" issue, I do actually read that snippet as suggesting that it is indeed humans or post-humans (shades of Morlocks) living underground, devouring the mother we killed even after she is dead. Mostly I feel this because that quote seemed to have a connotation of blame, that those living underground, cast as maggots, were blameworthy for her death, which would pretty much have to be humans unless Pierre Boulle was right and monkeys take over the planet.

- Shell

Andrew Bollen — 07 Feb 2003, 16:41 · follows cilluff1 at optonline.net

Shell wrote:

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Earth, properly. We could have saved her by acting with more forethought instead of repeating the tragedy of the commons on a global scale.

I agree. At least on a first reading, it's very straightforward.

As for "We could have taken her with us" etc, I think it obviously means "taken her to the stars", speaking of humanity in general. They left her behind, so they end up with sterile white ships, no trees, no birds etc.

sheila miguez — 07 Feb 2003, 16:54 · follows Andrew Bollen

--- Andrew Bollen <abollen at internode.on.net> wrote:

As for "We could have taken her with us" etc, I think it obviously means
"taken her to the stars", speaking of humanity in general. They left her behind, so they end up with sterile white ships, no trees, no birds etc.

I agree with this.

But I think another possibility for the worms inside of her are technologically constructed black holes or some sort of other exotic matter that humans may have used during their technological advancement. Perhaps as a temporary means to deal with the Red Giant stage of the sun until they could leave.

A carelessness about the fate of the earth. And she is left with cosmic strings revolving around inside her. (Though I know cosmic strings are not an accepted object -- perhaps something similar.)

And it would fit with what you say here -- the user fits the technology rather than the technology fitting the user. The ships are designed for the convenience of their upkeep rather than to benefit the life of the occupants.

The earth was manipulated and discarded for the benefit of the technology rather than gardened in a sustainable way for the benefit of all.

SPOILER for another book

Was it Earth by David Brin where cosmic strings fall into the core of the earth?

mimosa

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Feb 2003, 17:26 · follows sheila miguez

Okay, I was hoping people would wait a day or two and let one-and-all get read "Castaway" before the spoilage should begin ... but since it has, some thinks from the blattidaean microcranium.

1. I think that, yes, there is a thematic link (but not "in the same universe" or even "in an alternate version of the same universe," except in the very broad sence that all distant-future skiffy consitutes "alternate versions" of

our universe) to the Lupiverse, the Briah cycle, etc.

Specifically: I perceive a resonance between the "woman" and the Mother ... not necessarily that they are the same kind or order of being, but the Mother's people (Scylla, etc.) seem to be a kind of mockery (as in "trolls are a mockery of the Ents") of the "woman" and her kind (if she has one).

Thematically, then, it seems that this is about the _right_ relationship to the Earth-goddess.

2. I have the distinct impression that the narrator's people live (almost?) entirely on their ships, that one of the things that puzzles or amazes him about the castaway is that he actually _lived_ "dirtside" for twenty-seven years or so. Consider, for example, the first two sentences:

We picked him up on some dead world nobody ever goes to. We did it because we had a field problem that required a lot of tests, and that stuff is easier if you can just dodge in and out of the ship without worrying about the airlocks and how much air you're dumping every time you go outside.

This sounds to me like a ship that doesn't land very often; and, of course, the narrator doesn't know what trees or birds are. And common metaphors have been transmogrified to speak of life on ships rather than worlds:

I said was it as good for you as it was for her,
and did you feel the ship jump?

3. Yes, the Earth (I'm reasonably certain she/it is the Earth) is badly poisoned.

"...There's still a few plants. They're not good,
but you can eat them if you boil them long enough
and keep changing the water."

So polluted, in fact, that evolution can't keep up:

"She's old," he said. "Old and ugly, and she can't
think any more. She tries to think of new things,
but nothing comes. Nothing works now..."

So, yes, at one level at least it's an eco-fable.

"We could have saved her..."

"We never wanted to help her. We never wanted to
save her, and now we couldn't if we wanted to..."

4. The big question in my mind is: to whom is the castaway speaking when he says "I love you" again and again? The woman (who is not present, and is dead in any case)? The narrator? The entire human race? And ... is it him speaking, or is it the woman, who put "part of herself into [the castaway's] brain?

(Then, too, a "part" of her surviving in the castaway would explain why the whiteness of the ship "never sucked the color out of him.")

5. As to the "things inside her, eating the corpse" that were "part of her..." notice that the castaway _smiles_ as he talks about it. A very strange smile

I never had seen a smile like that before,
and I don't ever want to see another one.

Now, what kind of smile is that? Superior? No; the narrator probably sees superior smiles a dozen times a day from the officers. I think it's a smile of radical love ... and if, as I suspect, a "part" of the "woman" still lives in the castaway, then his(?) "I love you" seems to me to represent a signal of an extraordinary forgiveness, the mother forgiving the child who has been the cause of her death.

Just my tuppence worth ...

Andrew Bollen — 08 Feb 2003, 05:13 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Mimosa wrote:

The earth was manipulated and discarded for the benefit of the technology rather than gardened in a sustainable way for the benefit of all.

Sort of interesting to compare with a Brown Book eco story that Severian tells in UOTNS: "The Town that Forgot Fauna". Settlers heavy an old woman (Fauna - a Gaea figure, presumably) out of her land; she acquiesces on condition the new town does her honors; over time the town forgets her; the land fails, and so does the town; the woman returns to make a garden again.

"Castaway" seems like the end result of that playing out over & over again, so she has nothing left with which to remake the garden. Alternatively, the result of finding a way of doing without her.