

Wintry thoughts on Wolfe

The Urth list — 12 messages, 7 voices, 16 Feb 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3853>

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Adam Stephanides — 16 Feb 2003, 14:02

Last month, Nigel Price suggested that the "theologies" implicit in Wolfe's fictions aren't necessarily the same as the theology Wolfe believes is true in reality. This is a good point, which can be extended beyond theological specifics to basic world-views. Behind many of the posts here which seek to provide a "Christian" interpretation of Wolfe, there lurks the belief that because Wolfe is a believing traditional Christian, all his works must relate to Christ's redemption of humanity, and therefore must ultimately provide some sort of redemption. But in most of Wolfe's major works, there is either no redemption at all -- PEACE, 5HC, "The Island of Doctor Death...", "The Death of Doctor Island," "Forlesen" -- or what redemption there is fails to outweigh the horrors that have preceded -- UOTNS, BOTLS, BOTSS. One could argue that the lack of redemption is due to the characters' lack of faith; but even when Christianity is mentioned in these works, as at the end of PEACE, the works as a whole don't present redemption through faith as a real possibility. If one reads Wolfe's works purely for what is in them, he's one of the bleakest authors I know; perhaps bleaker than he consciously intends.

Something else that contributes to my sense of Wolfe's bleakness is the absence of love from his works. Does any of his major novels have a protagonist who is genuinely capable of loving another individual (as distinct from compassion)? The closest, perhaps, are Green in TAD and Silk in BOTLS, but there's something obsessive about both these loves: neither Green nor Silk really knows the woman he "loves," and I don't think either of them is really interested in knowing her as a person. (Though it's been a long time since I've read BOTLS.) Horn's love for Nettle is unconvincing, and his feelings for Seawrack and Jahlee are more like lust than love; and Severian, Weer, and the protagonists of 5HC all seem incapable of love. Wolfe is a great writer, but his emotional range is limited.

--Adam

James Jordan — 16 Feb 2003, 21:38 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 08:02 AM 2/16/2003, Adam wrote:

Last month, Nigel Price suggested that the "theologies" implicit in Wolfe's fictions aren't necessarily the same as the theology Wolfe believes is true in reality. This is a good point, which can be extended beyond theological specifics to basic world-views. Behind many of the posts here which seek to provide a "Christian" interpretation of Wolfe, there lurks the belief that because Wolfe is a believing traditional Christian, all his works must relate to Christ's redemption of humanity, and therefore must ultimately provide some sort of redemption.

I know this is not pointed at me (Pat the Nut) above anyone else, Adam, but I certainly don't think "all" his works are put in a Christian worldview. And of those that are, I don't think all include the notion of redemption. Like you, I tend to think Wolfe is more at home displaying the horror of sin and/or of human failings and their consequences. If there is salvation, it's off the page, something maybe reading this or that story might make the reader desire. On the other hand, however, in terms of a general Christian worldview, not the specifics of

redemption, I do think one sees this throughout Wolfe's major works. *Peace* has something to do with either hell or purgatory. TAD shows Mama & the Italian Restaurant interested in redeeming Lara and the goddess-world from itself. Christian sacramental allegories/images are all over the "Sun" dodekology. Ben Free is a semi-Christ (a sort of "American Messiah") in FLF, and the characters get a new birth via time travel self-remaking. A pre-Christian world is displayed in the *Soldier* novels -- not a friendly pagan world, but a world in desperate need of something better. As for *Castleview*, I'll give it a pass.

But Wolfe likes to write about worlds and worldviews. The clash of religious worldviews, and their possible reconciliation in Christianity, is thematic in TAD and the *Soldier* books, and perhaps most notably in the

Long Sun, where idolatry is a major theme.

I think it is mainly in his shorter fiction that Wolfe plays games in other gardens outside this worldview. And of course, occasionally his shorter fiction is rather explicitly Christian ("To the Seventh," "Westwind," "Detective of Dreams").

But in most of Wolfe's major works, there is either no redemption at all -- PEACE, 5HC, "The Island of Doctor Death...", "The Death of Doctor Island," "Forlesen" -- or what redemption there is fails to outweigh the horrors that have preceded -- UOTNS, BOTLS, BOTSS. One could argue that the lack of redemption is due to the characters' lack of faith; but even when Christianity is mentioned in these works, as at the end of PEACE, the works as a whole don't present redemption through faith as a real possibility. If one reads Wolfe's works purely for what is in them, he's one of the bleakest authors I know; perhaps bleaker than he consciously intends.

I tend to agree. I think a tragic sense pervades much of Wolfe, and as John Clute pointed out during his brief sojourn here, the Christian worldview is comedic. Wolfe likes Chesterton, but he sure ain't Chesterton. Redemption is present only as glints and glimmers. Characters fail frequently. I do think all these glints and glimmers and failings and very partial salvations are designed to point outside the text and, within the text, to an eschaton.

I do get the impression that fewer of Wolfe's later works are horrific than his earlier ones.

Something else that contributes to my sense of Wolfe's bleakness is the absence of love from his works.

Yeah. When I first read Wolfe many years ago, I thought "He's a lot like Cordwainer Smith, except that Smith wrote one love story after another, and Wolfe writes one horror story after another."

I have come to think this, though. Wolfe may not be very good at writing about love, and so does not try very much. But he does give "glints and glimmers" of it, and if this is part of his craft (maybe making good of his weakness), then it is much like what he does with redemption and salvation.

Wolfe may be a Thomist, but he seems to function with an extremely Augustinian and Calvinian conception of human depravity. Human beings can and do ruin everything. They aren't much good at love. Human love is questionable, and is linked up with appalling selfishness. I think this, again, "points off the page" to the need for a better Lover and a better Love.

Patera Nutria

Michael Andre-Driussi — 16 Feb 2003, 22:46 · follows James Jordan

Adam Stephanides, post-Valentine's Day, wrote:

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in BOTLS, but there's something obsessive about both these loves: neither Green nor Silk really knows the woman he "loves," and I don't think either of them is really interested in knowing her as a person. (Though it's been a long time since I've read BOTLS.) Horn's love for Nettle is unconvincing, and his feelings for Seawrack and Jahlee are more like lust than love; and Severian, Weer, and the protagonists of 5HC all seem incapable of love. Wolfe is a great writer, but his emotional range is limited.

It would be easier (or should that be "possible"?) to approach this if I had some examples of a few authors inside and outside of genre who write fiction about love (monolithic or otherwise). Fictions that you find convincing.

=mantis=

Adam Stephanides — 18 Feb 2003, 01:51 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

on 2/16/03 4:46 PM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:
Adam Stephanides, post-Valentine's Day, wrote:

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[snip]

It would be easier (or should that be "possible"?) to approach this if I had some examples of a few authors inside and outside of genre who write fiction about love (monolithic do you mean monogamous? or otherwise). Fictions that you find convincing.

Well, the paragraph you quote was triggered by my rereading Patrick O'Leary's THE IMPOSSIBLE BIRD, which, while it may not be "about love," does contain convincing depictions of love. So do John Crowley's works. As for non-genre authors, none spring to mind immediately. (Obviously, there are many who've written about love, but none that I've read recently enough, or recall well enough, to be able to say definitely that I find them convincing.)

But I'm not sure why you need this information to "approach" my claim. If you believe Wolfe's protagonists are capable of genuine love, why not say so?

--Adam

Michael Andre-Driussi — 18 Feb 2003, 15:37 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides wrote:

But I'm not sure why you need this information to "approach" my claim. If you believe Wolfe's protagonists are capable of genuine love, why not say so?

Because I don't know what you are "pointing at" when you say "genuine love." If I don't know this, then my approach is limited to a shrug. I cannot comment if I do not grasp the context.

Well, the paragraph you quote was triggered by my rereading Patrick O'Leary's THE IMPOSSIBLE BIRD, which, while it may not be "about love," does contain convincing depictions of love. So do John Crowley's works.

So then, here is a start: which scenes from which John Crowley books (barring THE TRANSLATOR) spring to your mind as convincing depictions of "genuine love"?

=mantis=

Michael Straight — 18 Feb 2003, 15:56 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

On Mon, 17 Feb 2003, Adam Stephanides wrote:

But I'm not sure why you need this information to "approach" my claim. If you believe Wolfe's protagonists are capable of genuine love, why not say so?

Because this sort of thing is so subjective. You say Horn's love for Nettle is "unconvincing" (Meaning Wolfe failed to convince you the characters were real? or failed to convince you that Horn really loved her? Or that Horn is unconvinced?). I didn't have that reaction.

You point to Crowley. I've only read Little, Big and while the romance at the very beginning between Smoky and Alice was wonderful, every other relationship in the rest of the book (including Smoky and Alice's marriage) seemed incomprehensible to me, like I was reading and trying to understand a Martian romance novel. Which I guess was part of the point, that the fairies are *other*, so maybe this is atypical of Crowley's art.

-- Rostrum

James Wynn — 18 Feb 2003, 15:51 · follows Michael Straight

You didn't say you were limiting this discussion to romantic love so I'll list characters who are not too damaged or crabbed to be genuinely emotionally connected to another person:

V.R.T. (FhoC) hunting his mother across too planets Dorcas (BotNS) she seemed to genuinely love Severian Agia (BofNS) violently in love with her brother Latro (SoA) was genuinely in love his Amazon girlfriend Auk (BotLS) in love with Chenille and Tartaros

How is that for starting list of broadly known characters?

-----Original Message-----

From: Adam Stephanides [mailto:adamsteph at earthlink.net] Sent: Monday, February 17, 2003 7:51 PM To: urth at urth.net Subject: Re: (urth) Wintry thoughts on Wolfe

on 2/16/03 4:46 PM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:
Adam Stephanides, post-Valentine's Day, wrote:

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--Adam

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Alice K. Turner — 19 Feb 2003, 21:08 · follows James Wynn

So then, here is a start: which scenes from which John Crowley books (barring THE TRANSLATOR) spring to your mind as convincing depictions of "genuine love"?

=mantis=

Gosh, I think it would be difficult to find a book of any genre that portrays domestic love more eloquently than LITTLE, BIG. Sure Smoky strays with Sophie, but can anyone doubt his long-term devotion to Daily Alice? And as for short-term romantic obsession, well, holy Toledo, who in the hell beats Rush with Once a Day, Auberon with Sylvie, Pierce with Rose, even, more diffidently Spofford with Rosie? Mantis, you are having a frigid winter-chill indeed. Watch an episode of The Simpsons, with Homer and Marge, for heavens' sake.

Alice

Michael Andre-Driussi — 19 Feb 2003, 22:40 · follows Alice K. Turner

To begin, I did not intend to badger Adam Stephanides at all, and if that is how it was taken by anybody then I apologize.

Alga wrote:

Gosh, I think it would be difficult to find a book of any genre that portrays domestic love more eloquently than LITTLE, BIG. Sure Smoky strays with Sophie, but can anyone doubt his long-term devotion to Daily Alice? And as for short-term romantic obsession, well, holy Toledo, who in the hell beats Rush with Once a Day, Auberon with Sylvie, Pierce with Rose, even, more diffidently Spofford with Rosie?

Of course I thought of these examples, too, but I thought that, for example, Rush and Once a Day (of ENGINE SUMMER) might be already ruled out by Adam's knock against "obsessive love" wrt TAD and TBOTLS. In fact, I sense that the situation in TAD might be very much like the situation in not only ENGINE SUMMER but also LITTLE, BIG.

Here is what Adam wrote:

Something else that contributes to my sense of Wolfe's bleakness is the absence of love from his works. Does any of his major novels have a protagonist who is genuinely capable of loving another individual (as distinct from compassion)? The closest, perhaps, are Green in TAD and Silk in BOTLS, but there's something obsessive about both these loves: neither Green nor Silk really knows the woman he "loves," and I don't think either of them is really interested in knowing her as a person. (Though it's been a long time since I've read BOTLS.) Horn's love for Nettle is unconvincing, and his feelings for Seawrack and Jahlee are more like lust than love; and Severian, Weer, and the protagonists of 5HC all seem incapable of love. Wolfe is a great writer, but his emotional range is limited.

If by using "genuine love" Adam means "domestic love," that would be an important step to establish (and it could well be the case, given the particular singling out of Horn and Nettle). Yes, this would rule out ENGINE SUMMER, pretty much, and LITTLE, BIG would probably be king.

I think it was Crush who offered a list of mainly supporting characters (except for Latro) showing love: they may be good examples, but Adam is talking specifically about main characters. A possible strike against Latro might well be the lack of domesticity; the fact that he only loves her for one of the two books; or any number of reasons I couldn't hope to enumerate.

But you know? It really =is= easier to just say, "'Every man to his taste,' as the farmer said when he kissed the cow." Or just shrug and move on.

=mantis=

Adam Stephanides — 20 Feb 2003, 20:17 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

James Wynn wrote:

V.R.T. (FhoC) hunting his mother across too planets
Dorcas (BotNS) she seemed to genuinely love Severian
Agia (BofNS) violently in love with her brother
Latro (SoA) was genuinely in love his Amazon girlfriend
Auk (BotLS) in love with Chenille and Tartaros

I haven't read the Soldier books in a long time, and my memory of them is dim, so you may well be right about Latro. But V.R.T. is searching for the truth about himself, not for his mother, at least as I read it.

As for the other three, I did originally say "protagonists." Especially in Wolfe's books, it's the viewpoint character who dominates the reader's experience. The effect on the reader of being tied to the consciousness of a man unable to love won't be dispelled by observing from afar other characters who love.

Having said this, I must confess with embarrassment that I'd forgotten when I wrote my original post about Severian's relationship with Thecla. (Interesting that nobody brought this up in reply.) Though I haven't reread TBOTNS in a while either, I'd be willing to concede this as a counterexample to my original claim. But note how gingerly Wolfe handles the Severian-Thecla relationship: not until long after Thecla's death do we learn there was any sexual component to it, and even then we only learn of this in brief allusions. And Severian's final judgment on Thecla is rather clinical, iirc.

Rostrum wrote:

But I'm not sure why you need this information to "approach" my claim. If you believe Wolfe's protagonists are capable of genuine love, why not say so?

Because this sort of thing is so subjective.

Not so much so. My point had been, not that Wolfe does a poor job of portraying what I confusingly called "genuine love," but that, for whatever reasons, he generally chooses not to portray it. (See my other reply for an attempt to clarify what I meant.)

And if it were subjective, so what? Responses to literature are inherently subjective; that doesn't mean it's not worthwhile to talk about them.

(The work of explication done on this list is very valuable; but it sometimes seems to me that in the process we give short shrift to Wolfe's work as literature (and I include myself in that "we")).

You say Horn's love for Nettle is "unconvincing" (Meaning Wolfe failed to convince you the characters were real? or failed to convince you that Horn really loved her? Or that Horn is unconvinced?). I didn't have that reaction.

Meaning that Horn failed to convince me he really loved her. Or, strictly speaking, the Narrator. He says he loves her, but his behavior isn't consistent with this imo. His betrayal of her to Krait in the pit can perhaps be excused as simple human weakness (it occurs to me that this scene is very reminiscent of the Room 101 scene from 1984). And his adultery with Seawrack can be excused by the Mother's spell. But Jahlee didn't place him under a spell; nor did his wives in Gaon. (Smoky's brief affair with Sophie hardly compares to Horn's serial adultery.) And, while Horn leaves a great deal out of his written narrative, he includes his betrayal and his adulteries in an account he knows Nettle will read, and be hurt by. These do not seem to me the actions of a man who loves his wife.

Whether Wolfe intended to convey that Horn genuinely loved Nettle or not, I don't know.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 20 Feb 2003, 20:17 · follows Adam Stephanides

on 2/19/03 4:40 PM, Michael Andre-Driussi at mantis at siriusfiction.com wrote:
To begin, I did not intend to badger Adam Stephanides at all, and if that is how it was taken by anybody then I apologize.

No problem. I just wasn't clear where you were coming from.

Of course I thought of these examples, too, but I thought that, for example, Rush and Once a Day (of ENGINE SUMMER) might be already ruled out by Adam's knock against "obsessive love" wrt TAD and TBOTLS. In fact, I sense that the situation in TAD might be very much like the situation in not only ENGINE SUMMER but also LITTLE, BIG.

To clarify what I was talking about with TAD and TBOTLS (and, rereading what I wrote, I see I was unclear), what I was trying to point to was not the obsessive nature of Green and Silk's loves, but that each of them seemed uninterested in relating to his inamorata as a person, in having a "communion of souls," so to speak (and I realize this is still pretty vague, but it's the best I can do right now). Green doesn't seem to need a relationship at all; he's happy just to be near Lara. He's not at all perturbed when she tells him that she can only love him as she would love a dog. As for Silk, my memory of TBOTLS is not that good, as I said; but my recollection was that the "Hyacinth" Silk loves is largely a creation of his imagination. Both Rush and Smoky, on the other hand, do seem to want to relate to their beloveds as people, to go beyond the images that they have of them in their mind and really know them; though you could argue that they both fail.

--Adam

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 20 Feb 2003, 23:09 · follows Adam Stephanides

A couple of days ago, Mantis wrote:
It would be easier (or should that be "possible"?) to approach this if I had some examples of a few authors inside and outside of genre who write fiction about love (monolithic or otherwise). Fictions that you find convincing.

Really, I'm surprised nobody's mentioned either of the obvious in-genre examples:

Sturgeon. Almost anything after about 1950 by Sturgeon.

But even more:

Le Guin. Especially TEHANU, but lots of her other stuff too

-- even LEFT HAND is, in an oblique way, a love story; and there's a powerful love story driving THE DISPOSSESSED. In fact, her fiction is in many ways a better example than Sturgeon's, because Sturgeon was so busy analyzing and dissecting love that, at times, the actual portrayal suffered; plus, he was busy with "variations on the theme," while Le Guin simply writes about people and those people sometimes love each other.

(I find myself thinking "Surely Connie Willis," but, oddly, I honestly can't think of a good example -- and ditto for Octavia Estelle Butler.)