

Hat Tree: Robert's reply

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 11 May 2003

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Nigel Price — 11 May 2003, 11:56

I thought that it was far too long since we heard from Robert Borski, so I was delighted when I got up early this morning to find this message waiting for me. I've asked Robert whether I can post this to the list, but as he's off on his travels and may not be back in touch till June, I thought that I would take a liberty and post it anyway, without waiting for his reply. (Robert, if this is now June and that wasn't OK, then please accept my apologies!)

Nigel

Nigel:

Just a few short points before I begin the long drive over storm-drenched roads to O' Hare.

Re malaria vs Hansen's disease: I concede to you that malaria seems the more likely disease than leprosy. My notebooks are back in Europe and a quick, very cursory, glance over the relevant text turned up nothing, so I'm not sure why I diagnosed Hansen's. I do like the symbolic value of leprosy, however, as well as its Biblical resonance, and I seem to remember (but could not find) a passage wherein the dreaming Baden has a nightmare about body parts falling off. (Also have not listened to the audio version yet, but hope to do so on the flight back over.) But while malaria's symptomatic profile seems more in line with Baden's illness, what I don't like about it is that it carries little symbolic freight and tells us next to nothing about Baden that we don't already know. Granted, Wolfe may have not disclosed what's afflicting Baden out of sheer lupine mischievousness, but it makes him a poorer writer in my opinion. Then I came across your musings about HIV and thought a-ha: at least a sexually-transmitted disease would help make sense of Baden's reluctance to come out and name the disease; it also shows he may have strayed from the marital bed; and if he's passed it on to his wife, it may help explain their estrangement. Curiously also, in the text version of "Tree," the following passage occurs. Baden, talking about his new island neighbors, states: "The people are fat and happy, and my guess is not more than half are dumb. Once or twice one gets yaws or some such, and Rev. Robbins gives him arsenic. Which cures it. Pooley!" (The italics are Wolfe's; had he not used them I would have highlighted the Pooley.) Now yaws, as you may or may not remember from your tropical island diseases seminar, is caused by the *Treponema pertenue* spirochete, which, while non-venereal in nature, is morphologically and serologically indistinguishable from *T. Pallidum*, the causative microbe of syphilis. Moreover, various secondary and tertiary stages of the disease closely approximate many of Baden's symptoms. (There's also a superficial resemblance between the skin lesions caused by yaws, syphilis and leprosy--and this might explain Baden's nightmare if the falling-off-parts-passage I cited above isn't imaginary). Could therefore Baden's secret disease--one that has not responded to antibiotics ("Pooley!") and that he may have passed on to his wife--be syphilis? At least for me this helps explain a number of story's unresolved plot points, whereas malaria does almost nothing.

"Baden," for those of us who speak German, means "to bathe," and surely this is the most

relevant onomastic.

And lastly, Wolfe's rather Oliver Sachs-like title: besides being something from which natives can fashion island haberdashery, the tree represents the Tree--Christ's cross--showing once again its subversion/denigration as a potent symbol by the Satanic Hanga. (Especially since Catholic men are not allowed to wear hats in church.)

I would have posted these to the list, but as I am no longer a subscriber (it's easier for me to play catchup by checking the urth site on an infrequent basis than try to peruse 600 entries in my email box every ten weeks or so), this seems the simpler route.

All in all, I rather enjoyed the series of posts you contributed on the tale, and look forward to the next series on whatever else-- although it will probably be late June before I get to read them.

Best.

Robert