

Tree Hat Contributors

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 12 May 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4000>

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Nigel Price — 12 May 2003, 17:59

Thanks to Mantis, Patera Nutria and Robert Borski for their helpful contributions to the analysis of "The Tree is My Hat".

I was going to comment on their comments in detail, but a lot of it boiled down to "Yes, I agree!" and "Oh, that's interesting!", which was amicable but not particularly scholarly or insightful on my part. Instead, then, I'll broadly agree with them, thank them here and comment on just one or two details.

(And still go, "Yes, you're right!" occasionally.)

Good stuff from Nutria on the names Mark and Adam, but I'm still puzzled as to the significance of Mary having twins.

Nutria: I noticed that after his deal with the shark, Baden is unable even to visit the church, being too sick on Sunday.

Good spot - yes!

Nutria: A google search shows that Mervyn can mean "sea hill," "sea ruler," or "high hill." There seems a pregnant reason by Robbins rejects that name, in context.

Maybe it's because Rob gets off his metaphorical hill of western affluence and authority and comes down to work with the people by the sea. He has turned his back on ruling and become a servant. Note that Rob welcomes Baden's can of coke from the fridge as a great western luxury. He himself seems to have access to neither coka cola nor refrigerators.

Nutria: Internet: A "spiritual" medium that links Baden both with a witch and with Yule Christmas. Another manifestation of the choice before him.

OK, I'll buy that. Maybe it's a reminder too that magic and spiritual evil aren't restricted to the South Seas. They exist back in America as well.

On the subject of the UFO which Baden sees, Nutria comments...

My best guess is that Baden as a modern man perceives a spiritual reality in terms he understands, since he (initially) does not believe in a spirit realm. Given that the shark is Satan (see below), it feels wrong to me for Wolfe to overlay an SF dimension to this story. And, there is much discussion of perception in the story. So I'm more comfortable, at this point, with a *Castlevia* explanation of the flying saucer.

This has to be one possibility. If it's right, we can go back to seeing the Polynesians as being the descendants of an ancient Andean ruling class. Over against this, though, is all the talk about the stars being like islands. Your comment on the SF dimension feeling wrong is the very thing I was getting at when I suggested that Wolfe might be "overegging the pudding", as the expression goes. I don't think that we can completely rule out the science fictional element, though. It's still there, at least as one of the story's explanations of what is going on. Whether its significance is ultimately literal or metaphorical is hard to define.

Agree entirely that "Baden" = "Bad'un". So far I have managed to resist the temptation to make any reference to the founder of the scouting movement, running round in shorts on Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour...No, I don't even want to think about it...

I agree with Robert Borski that it would be thematically convenient if Baden's mystery ailment were some sort of sexually transmitted disease.

RB: 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.

The trouble is, while is all eminently possible, there just doesn't seem to be enough evidence in the text to support this interpretation in any conclusive fashion. My instinct is that if Wolfe wanted us to think that Baden's disease were sexually transmitted, there would be a reference somewhere in the story to the risk of his passing it on either to his wife Mary or to his new partner Langi. But there's nothing remotely about that - in the audio version, anyway.

RB: 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.)

(In Robert's original message, it was the sentence "Which cures it." which was in italics.)

Does anyone know about the medicinal uses of arsenic?

Reading the quotation in cold print makes me realise how patronising and dismissive Baden is about the very people he is supposed to have come to help. Nutria has already mentioned the contrast between Baden's apparent inactivity and Rob's industry. They also represent two different streams of "development" for the island: Baden's is materialist and secular and Rob's is spiritual and, apparently, medicinal. Of the two, the sensitive missionary comes out better in this story than the federal development man.

I seem to remember that in one of his interviews, possibly the one in Across the Wounded Galaxy, Wolfe spoke approvingly of a friend of his who was going off (to Africa, I think) to be a Christian missionary.

RB: "Baden," for those of us who speak German, means "to bathe," and surely this is the most relevant onomastic.

Yes! Baden does indeed go bathing in the shark-infested bay.

Robert refers to the story's titular tree being a possible reference to the cross, while Mantis mentions a possible link with the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Both seem likely. I'm sure that Baden's paradise isle with a devilish shark is a deliberate, fallen, counterpart to Eden with its cunning snake. I'm sure that the comment "The tree is my hat." is also an indication of Hanga's underground and therefore, traditionally, hellish nature. The Lord may refer to the Earth as his footstool, but Hanga's spirit is dead and under the earth, with the tree as the marker of his grave.

Nigel

Josh Geller — 12 May 2003, 19:00 · follows Nigel Price

On Mon, 2003-05-12 at 10:59, Nigel Price wrote:
Does anyone know about the medicinal uses of arsenic?

The use of arsenic to cure syphilis was discovered by Dr. Paul Ehrlich I think around 1900 or maybe a little before. The treatment remained the standard treatment until the invention of penicillin.

J.

mournings glory — 13 May 2003, 00:54 · follows Josh Geller

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The use of arsenic to cure syphilis was discovered by Dr. Paul Ehrlich
I think around 1900 or maybe a little before. The treatment remained the
standard treatment until the invention of penicillin.

Salvarsan (or 606 as it was sometimes called) was discovered in 1909.

A relatively good movie about it (considering the times and the topic) was made in 1940, "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet," and starred Edward G. Robinson.

msg (chemically unrelated to arsphenamine)