

Flying fish

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 13 May 2003

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Nigel Price — 13 May 2003, 01:05

Thanks to Che Monro, Fernando Gouvea and John Barach for the alternative takes on the ending to "The Tree is My Hat" and the meaning of the story's title.

Intrigued, I listened again to end of the story in the audio version. It goes like this:

An engine has quit. Pilot says, "No danger."

He is out there, swimming beside the plane.
I watch him. I don't know...He's disappeared,
disappeared into a thunderhead.

The tree is my hat.

Oh god, oh my god, my blood brother, what can I do?

Is this the same as the written version? The audio version seems to end very suddenly immediately after this.

"Beside the plane" is a bit ambiguous. I'd interpreted it as meaning that Baden could see the shark in the clear water below the low flying plane. But the interpretation that the shark is actually flying through the air is also perfectly possible, and given that Baden has seen the shark-like UFO, well, yes, he could be seeing the UFO-which-is-really-the-shark. And given that he's possessed by the shark spirit, yes, he could indeed be seeing his own reflection.

There's even the possibility that the shadow of the aircraft itself might look like that of the shark. You remember that business referred to in the quotation I gave from *_Myths and Legends of the South Seas_* about the bodies of dead chiefs being encased in wooden fish and floated out to sea where they are then eaten by a shark? The example quoted is of a wooden swordfish, but other types of wooden fish were also used. In the Solomon Islands, for example, they put the bodies inside a wooden shark. (Picture on p56-57 of M&LotSS.) Baden is in a shark-like aircraft, being flown out to sea. In other words, he's a dead man, and the shark is waiting.

The line, "He's disappeared, disappeared into a thunderhead." would fit in well with the idea of the shark flying alongside Baden's aircraft, but wouldn't necessarily discredit the other interpretations, or perhaps "visualisations" is a better word, as I don't think that we're in any substantial disagreement as to what is going on. I have the distinct impression that we're supposed to assume that "He's disappeared into a thunderhead" is supposed to indicate that the thunderhead itself is malign and manipulated by Hanga. Hange has entered the thunderhead. He may even have "turned into" the thunderhead.

The whole logic and momentum of the story seems to indicate that it's a tale of damnation - a horror story, a tragedy. Even so, the meaning of the final lines remain potentially ambiguous.

The tree is my hat.

Oh god, oh my god, my blood brother, what can I do?

It all depends which "god" Baden is praying to. Is it "god" or "God" in the printed version? We know that Baden has become Hanga's blood brother, so the logical thing is to assume that he's talking to the evil Hanga, who is about to "devour" him. But what if Baden really did come to his senses in the middle of the attack on his family and cut off his own right hand? Could he even at this late stage be remembering the rejected saviour who shed his blood for him and called his disciples his brothers?

No, my reading is that there is no last minute repentance, but it's interesting to see that it still remains an outside possibility!

As for Hanga being the island...Hmmmmmm. Interesting! In terms of scale, the tree is a very small hat for a whole island, while it makes a perfectly admirable one for a body buried at its roots. Unless we assume some sort of poetic "one for the many" trope, it would be more natural for the island to say, "the forest is my hat." No, while I can't rule out the island theory completely, I still find the more natural explanation to be for Hanga to be a body under a tree. He's a white dwarf with sharp teeth on land, a hammerhead shark in the sea, and a shark-like UFO in the air.

Then again, we all know about Wolfe and islands. Is this story yet another part of the Wolfe archipelago? Rob is the missionary doctory of death-by-shark island?

Nigel

Che Monro — 13 May 2003, 11:52 · follows Nigel Price

Then again, we all know about Wolfe and islands. Is this story yet another part of the Wolfe archipelago? Rob is the missionary doctory of death-by-shark island?

Nigel

laughs Oh dear!

I find this story interesting because it's a study of the primitive God/Devil. Hanga is both a God and a Demon, capable of friendship, and quite possibly the bestowal of magical powers, and also the destroyer.

You hurt me, Hanga, when you attack my friends and family you hurt me! I wonder if Hanga was feeling a bit jealous and lonely? Perhaps Wolfe could have developed this story a bit further, usually in the bible - the story of David, for instance - the plot that leads a man into conflict with his God are more intricate and involved. Although this does have all the classic elements.

And Mary... "He was such a handsome man"... "I could tell from the their expressions that something was wrong..." Did Mary commit adultery with Hanga? Even if only in thought?

Um, if so then I bet there is some hint in the scene at North Point.

Che

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