

Doomed men's manuscripts

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 15 May 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4009>

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Nigel Price — 15 May 2003, 22:36

Nutria wrote concerning my recent confusion of names...

Yes. Twas me. But Tree of the Knowledge of
Good and Evil, where the original man-eating
shark dwelt.

You see? I even get the names of my trees mixed up.

But I'm hampered in analysis, not having the full text.

It might have been better if, suffering a similar lack, I had shared your reticence!

Well, how likely is it that Wolfe managed to
find Severian's memoirs after they travelled
the corridors of time? And Latro's journal,
for that matter? Somehow, he gets hold of these
things. No one knows how. He's not telling.
He's obviously got some kind of inside track.

The ancients speculated that all things lost on earth might eventually end up on the moon. That, for example, is where Ariosto located Orlando's lost wits. But Ariosto and the ancients were wrong. The Limbo of the Lost is actually located in the basement of an ordinary-looking house in the suburbs of Chicago. Manuscripts, stories and ideas lost in other times, places and dimensions all end up there.

The owner of the basement comes down early every morning, dusts them all off and, having selected the finest and most unusual, proceeds to polish them and polish them until they shine with a light to rival that of the new sun at its zenith. He then passes them on to a merchant who lives on a high tor, and he in turn sells them to curious and discerning collectors around the world. They treasure these strange findings, though few understand their true meaning or purpose.

Maybe the Outsider gives them to him.

I'm sure He does.

I still, on balance, see "The Tree is my Hat" as a story of damnation rather than a "just in time" repentance. I'm fascinated to find, though, as so often before, that when I look, or in this case listen, hard enough, I find a sort of counter-current running through the story which hints at a possible outcome completely opposite from the one that I still think is intended.

Just to illustrate how another writer might have tackled the story, here is the ending of the journal kept by another doomed narrator, this time the hero of the embedded tale in William Hope Hodgson's gothic masterpiece, *The House on the Borderland* (1908). The hero lives in a castle built over a chasm leading to a hellish parallel dimension. We join the story near the end. The hero is writing his journal, even as The Monster is finally about to break through into the castle and Get Him...

"Hush! I hear something, down - down in the cellars. It is a creaking sound. My God, it is the opening of the great, oak trap. What can be doing that? The scratching of my pen deafens me.... I must listen.... There are steps on the stairs; strange padding steps, that come up and nearer.... Jesus, be merciful to me, an old man. There is something fumbling at the door-handle. O God, help me now! Jesus - The door is opening - slowly. Somethi-

That is all.

Note.-From the unfinished word, it is possible, on the MS, to trace a faint line of ink, which suggests that the pen has trailed away over the paper; possibly through fright and weakness.-Ed.

I've always thought that this was a great ending, even if the idea of the hero scratching away at his journal while the Monster climbs the stairs and enters the room is patently ludicrous. (If only he had had a dictaphone!) But you don't have any doubt that the hero is going to meet An Awful Fate.

There are similarities with the ending of "The Tree is my Hat", but Wolfe, a far more sophisticated artist, says much less, and ends his narrative well before his hero actually encounters the fatal thunderstorm.

Incidentally, Hodgson provides a frame story to explain exactly how he and his friend discovered the doomed man's manuscript, which he then "edited" for publication. Wolfe does a little of this TBotNS, but provides no such account for "The Tree is my Hat".

Nigel

Chris — 15 May 2003, 23:08 · follows Nigel Price

This kind of thing was a staple with Lovecraftian fiction. The device might go way further back than that, but it seems to me that just about every Cthulhu story I've seen consists of a short lead-in by the skeptical editor who finds (or is given) the manuscript, then the manuscript itself often (but not always) ending abruptly, with suitable editor's notes at the end to wrap things up with some comment about how he doesn't believe the story, or the body was never found, etc.

It doesn't seem unreasonable that Wolfe might have been deliberately going for a bit of a Lovecraft atmosphere.

Chris

"Indeed it is hard to grasp why it hasn't already given birth... to its hero, that demon who will stage without scruple that horrifying play that reduces the whole age to laughter and to unconsciousness of the fact that it is laughing at itself." -- Soren Kierkegaard

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