

the problem with gaiman, mieville, and pullman

The Urth list — 18 messages, 12 voices, 29 Nov 2004

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4248>

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turin — 29 Nov 2004, 01:37

I am leery of message boards, considering they often turn into screaming matches which would probably happen less if the people talking could see each other face to face, but Urth seems like a decent place, except of course for the dying sun and the forces of Abaia, Erebus, etc.

Someone mentioned earlier that it has become a fashion lately to attack Lewis's work. Despite my own problems with Lewis's particular worldview, I have read essay by Neil Gaiman, China Mieville, and Phillip Pullman which were written basically to "debunk" Lewis and for Mieville Tolkien as well. Charges of racism, nostalgia, cruelty, etc., I don't think you can psychoanalyze an author from her work, and I was particularly disappointed in Gaiman's reaction. I mean, yes Narnia is less of an allegory than the Faerie Queene though much more of an allegory than Lord of the Rings, which Tolkien denied having any allegorical structure whatsoever.

Allegory is a very nebulous concept, though, we can call Mieville work Marxist romanticism or capitalist dystopia if we want, and Pullman age of enlightenment identity myth, and Gaiman neo-pagan mall mythology. Lewis cannibalizes things in Theosophy or Voyage to Arcturus or Lord Dunsany, Gaiman cannibalizes Roger Zelazny etc. Really we can replace cannibalize with "is paying attention to or concerned with" or "is influenced by" and instead of saying "allegory" we can say it is similar to narratives with similar content and dynamics. This is not what Gaiman et al. are doing. They are merely drawing a line between what they consider to be "leftist" or "liberal" fantasy, and "conservative" fantasy like Tolkien and Lewis, more so with Lewis. I find this appalling. I am not a Christian, and my pride is not hurt that they would try to detract from what they feel is Tolkien and Lewis's hegemony of "fantasy" literature. I do happen to think Tolkien and Lewis are more intelligent writers than their detractors, but this is besides the point. What I find appalling is the open and deliberate politicization of literature, is literature for its own sake or for furthering ideology. It is a serious problem whether you consider Narnia to be Christian propaganda or not; but I find it more difficult with the Science Fiction Trilogy or Till We Have Faces. What exactly is propaganda is another difficult problem. I certainly did not feel like Lewis was trying to evangelize me. The novel that is most often cited is The Last Battle, but as an eight year old I knew the Emperor from across the sea was probably some sort of God, but I just took the whole thing as story and that's how I still read it, and it never "softened" me up to Mere Christianity, so I don't understand what everyone's complaint is. Lewis's observations concerning human psychology seem very persuasive to me if not always the conclusions he draws from them.

I want to contrast Narnia with Pullman's His Dark Materials. I absolutely loved the series, and waited the five years until the last book with bated breath. The Amber Spyglass which turned out to be nothing more than a refutation of Christianity. I felt like he was preaching to me, and there are rumors he trashed the first manuscript, so I can only wonder what the book's first form was. Why use magic or talking polar bears to promote rationalism? Is it because he thought children will read them along with Lewis and create a politically balanced genre. To a certain degree I am biased, I will admit, because I think Wolfe, Lewis, Chesterton, Tolkien ask serious questions that Gaiman, Pullman, and Mieville do not, other "fantacists", I am excluding "science fiction", do not. Questions of metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, what it means to be human, what it means to be a nonhuman person, the problem of technology and how to use it, etc. Mieville, Gaiman, and Pullman seem to address these issues, but it does not

seem to me as if their attempts are anything other than cursory. Despite how "liberal" I may be or how "Christian" Lewis is, the fact remains I think he is a better thinker than the rest of them. I feel that this writers who just so happen to be Christian make serious commitments to this questions which means trying to answer them honestly and to a certain degree means revealing in part some of their Christian beliefs. With Mieville and Pullman it seems as if they are only trying to further political agendas primarily, the stories come second, and because they pretend to be good humanists, it's okay to indulge in the same "escapist" fantasy they attribute to Tolkien and Lewiss, very hypocritical. Gaiman seems not to want to commite to anything, and to this day, I have no idea what Gaiman thinks about anything, except that he probably voted for Kerry. I do not understand why they started attacking Lewiss simultaneously, was it jealousy, the impending Lord of the Rings movie, which I can't stand, or some weird statistical nodal point. That they were trying to debunk Lewis or steal his "throne" is ridiculous. There is nothing to debunk or steal. I dont believe science fiction and fantasy are secretly plagued by Christianity and a conservative political agenda, and I find that kind of thinking supercilious and dissapointing.

I am of course open to debate on this subject and will try not to snap. I haven't gotten a chance to read "the problem of susan yet" but I've read an essay Gaiman wrote on his feelings towards Lewiss before he wrote the story and it feels very much like it would be a piece of propaganda to me. I dont know how Gaiman can hate Lewis and like Michael Moorcock. He just doesn't seem to have good taste.

p.s. I am writing from hell, of course, so it should be perfectly obvious I am not a sheep in wolf's clothing.

p.p.s. if you are looking to avoid a heated debate on Tolkien and Lewis's "racial agenda", do notr ask me if I think Lord of the Rings or Narnia is about the crusades or the Moors.

p.p.p.s If Barliman does not deliver this, I will roast him.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Nov 2004, 12:16 · in reply to turin

Turin

Bravo! Bravissimo!

(Gee ... I hope you're male under that name...)

Yes, Urth manages in general to maintain a certain amount of decorum, not to say dulce, while debating some pretty hot points. It's small enough that we can feel that we "know" each other - and even when responding to someone we don't know we know that friends are looking on, and so we try not to behave like total asses.

Someone mentioned earlier that it has become a fashion lately to attack Lewis's work.

That would be me. I've seen it all over the place but especially in the "Gaiman generation."

Despite my own problems with Lewis's particular worldview, I have read essay by Neil Gaiman, China Mieville, and Phillip Pullman which were written basically to "debunk" Lewiss and for Mieville Tolkien as well.

I would very much like a pointer to Gaiman's essay, as up to now I have only his fictions to base this on. (Not only "The Problem of Susan," but also the _Sandman_ arc "A Game of You," which has some details that have always seemed to me to be idle passing swipes at the Narnia books.)

In fairness, though, I don't think Gaiman, at least, can be painted as simply being a Good Little Liberal in going after Lewis - after all, he has shown huge admiration for Chesterton and, for that matter, Wolfe, who is not exactly what I would call a screaming leftist. (As a side note, I

recently picked up a copy of Gaiman's and Wolfe's collaboration, "A Walking Tour of the Shambles," and it's laugh out loud funny.)

Charges of racism, nostalgia, cruelty, etc , I don't think you can psychoanalyze an author from her work,

H'mmm. I think you can, to some extent, but only based on a large body of work and only to the extent the work itself permits. A writer's work, if it's at all serious, necessarily reflects what the writer thinks and feels and believes (which are of course three aspects of one process, "abstraction in a human nervous system as a whole in an environment," but that's another discussion); anyone who could read the Narnia books and not figure out that the author was a Christian must be as ignorant of Christian belief and symbolism as I was, in second grade, when I didn't get it until I came to the end of The Last Battle. Duh!

and I was particularly disappointed in Gaiman's reaction. I mean, yes Narnia is less of an allegory than the Faerie Queene though much more of an allegory than Lord of the Rings, which Tolkien denied having any allegorical structure whatsoever.

H'mmm. I'm not sure what you mean by "less of an allegory" - from context you seem to imply that its author's intent was less allegorical than Spenser's? Perhaps: but both seemed to have first and foremost in their minds the process of telling a story; it's when a writer fails to keep that f&f that you get what the late Ted Sturgeon called "selling your birthright for a pot of message." The late Robert Heinlein committed this sin once or twice - most notably in Farnham's Freehold, where he managed not only not to tell much of a story, but also to garble his message to the point where many people thought it was a racist, pro-war book, when his intent was exactly the opposite: to show that the "supremacy" of whites was a historical accident, and to show that even for the survivors, a nuclear war would be an unmitigated disaster.

Allegory is a very nebulous concept, though, we can call Mieville work Marxist romanticism or capitalist dystopia if we want,

H'mm. Having just finished The Scar, I have to admit that I don't get much of that. I don't actually get much serious political content in his novels at all; mostly a sense of "Wow, look how grotesque this is!" which was enough to carry Perdido Street Station but not a second book, so that The Scar stayed on my backburner until I was well over halfway through it.

and Pullman age of enlightenment identity myth,

This is dead spot on.

and Gaiman neo-pagan mall mythology.

I am laughing. Can you hear me laughing? That's the best description of everything that is weakest in Gaiman (a writer I generally admire) I've run across to date. I shall doubtless steal it at some future date.

[...]

They are merely drawing a line between what they consider to be "leftist" or "liberal" fantasy, and "conservative" fantasy like Tolkien and Lewis, more so with Lewis. I find this appalling.

Well, of course, Lewis had his axes to grind quite as much as PG&M do. Tolkien had a few, but (unlike PG&M and sometimes Lewis - viz The Great Divorce) he didn't write whole books as grindstones; his concerns about, for example, the evils of industrial capitalism were completely natural in the context of tLotR, especially when voiced by Fangorn.

I am not a Christian,

As I am, it is good to have a non-Christian see some of the same things I'm seeing in the PG&M anti-Lewis didactic. As I am also pretty much a card-carrying liberal, I find this kind of "correctthink" behavior on the part of my fellow liberals rather embarrassing at times...

and my pride is not hurt that they would try to detract from what they feel is Tolkien and Lewis's hegemony of "fantasy" literature. I do happen to think Tolkien and Lewis are more intelligent writers than their detractors, but this is besides the point. What I find appalling is the open and deliberate politization of literature, is literature for its own sake or for furthering ideology.

As I said above, I think that a writer's beliefs - political or religious or what-have-ye - can't help but influence what she writes. But there are good ways and bad ways to do it; Lewis provides examples that range from very good (_Till We Have Faces_, which you could read and never suspect the writer of being a devout Christian - though if you know it it adds a great deal to the book) to mediocre (_The Last Battle_, in which all the masks come off and even my dumb eight year old self "got" it).

Gaiman in his fiction generally doesn't make this sort of mistake; Pullman's trilogy descends from excellent to (as Rick Nielsen of Cheap Trick once put it) "subtle like a mallet." I can't say much about Mieville because I frankly haven't found much of the way of meaning-structure in the two books I've read.

What exactly is propaganda is another difficult problem. I certainly did not feel like Lewis was trying to evangelize me. The novel that is most often cited is *The Last Battle*, but as an eight year old I knew the Emperor from across the sea was probably some sort of God, but I just took the whole thing as story and that's how I still read it, and it never "softened" me up to Mere Christianity,

Interesting: I feel quite certain that, in my case, the Narnia books _did_ help keep the Christian faith my family (and especially my grandmother) had started in me going at times when I might otherwise have "outgrown" it. But that's quite a different thing from whether it would have "softened" me to Christianity if I had not already been there.

Lewis's observations concerning human psychology seem very persuasive to me if not always the conclusions he draws from them.

H'mmm. I'd like to agree with you, but the truth is I don't think he wrote a decent adult female character until *Faces*. From the Queen in *Perelandra* to Jane Studdock and especially Fairy Hardcastle in *That Hideous Strength*, I come away with the feeling that these characters were written by a man who'd never actually _met_ a woman.

I want to contrast Narnia with Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. I absolutely loved the series, and waited the five years until the last book with bated breath. The *Amber Spyglass* which turned out to be nothing more than a refutation of Christianity.

Well, I think there was a _bit_ more to it than that, but certainly I have to agree that the series turns into fairly blatant Gnostic agitprop no later than the beginning of *TAS*. (Which makes it interesting read to read it against - he said, desperately dragging Wolfe into a discussion on the Urth list - the *Long Sun* series, which I have argued is an instantiation of a Gnostic cosmology within the larger context of a Christian cosmology.)

Why use magic or talking polar bears to promote rationalism?

Because - as Lewis once put it - "Sometimes stories best say what needs to be said."

To a certain degree I am biased, I will admit, because I think Wolfe, Lewis, Chesterton, Tolkien ask serious questions that Gaiman, Pullman, and Mieville do not, other "fantacists", I am excluding "science fiction", do not.

May I suggest reading Delany's fantasy works, and especially the "Neveryon" sequence? These are all about this kind of ...

Questions of metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, what it means to be human, what it means to be a nonhuman person, the problem of technology and how to use it, etc.

... well, not the question of "what it means to be a nonhuman person," but all the others, and especially semantics and epistemology. Plus a fairly intense economic dialectic.

Mieville, Gaiman, and Pullman seem to address these issues, but it does not seem to me as if their attempts are anything other than cursory.

I would love to hear someone describe how Mieville addresses them even cursorily. Perhaps I was too busy noticing the grotesquery of Bas-Lag, but I honestly did not see any of this.

Pullman I think goes a bit deeper than "cursory," but I don't think he really thinks things through very well - I get the feeling that he sticks with the first idea that appeals to him without subjecting it to very much scrutiny.

Gaiman ... well, he's one of the deepest writers ever to write comics. But in the company of Wolfe, Le Guin, Lewis, Tolkien, Chesterton, Delany, etc., he's like a one-legged man in an arse-kicking contest.

Despite how "liberal" I may be or how "Christian" Lewis is, the fact remains I think he is a better thinker than the rest of them.

Yes, I agree. His professional work, which is sometimes dismissed because of his breezy writing style, is extraordinary: I highly recommend The Discarded Image, one of the best works of Medieval Studies to come out of the 20th Century.

I feel that this writers who just so happen to be Christian make serious commitments to this questions which means trying to answer them honestly and to a certain degree means revealing in part some of their Christian beliefs.

I would go a step further: to be a Christian and an honest thinker in the modern era requires a degree of looking at hard questions that isn't necessary for humanists, because the scientific episteme offers (or appears to offer) so many challenges to the Christian episteme that the only other option, which many Christians (alas!) settle for, is a retreat into the "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" brand of fundamentalism-literalism. This is a pity because a Christian committed to dealing with the hard questions finds in the end that the "challenges" mostly vanish when you learn to think in both epistemes: indeed, to do so leaves one with a larger episteme that covers more of the world than either does separately.

But anyway.

I have no idea what Gaiman thinks about anything, except that he probably voted for Kerry.

Probably not; I believe that he's still a British subject.

I don't believe science fiction and fantasy are secretly plagued by Christianity and a conservative political agenda, and I find that kind of thinking supercilious and disappointing.

H'mmm. I tend to agree, though there is a strong conservative streak in SF - particularly in military SF. Perhaps more importantly, and this is why I would have expected Mieville to be an extreme liberal even if I hadn't read anything outside of his novels, is something I picked up from Delany's criticism. He puts it this way: "To fail to challenge something is to maintain it." That is, in writing of an imaginary culture, whether in the future, on an alien world, or in an imagined fantastic world, any social structure that remains as it is in the "real" world tends to support that structure in the "real" world. Take, for example, the nuclear family: if you posit a culture radically different from our own, but leave the nuclear family untouched, you've reinforced our societal assumption that the nuclear family is just "how things are." Obviously no writer can challenge everything - if you did, you would leave the reader with nothing to grasp - but the more a writer "challenges" in her fiction the more I suspect her of being politically leftist. Mieville "challenges" a great deal of our assumptions about reality, but doesn't really provide much in the way of "wouldn't it be better if...?"

I don't know how Gaiman can hate Lewis and like Michael Moorcock.
He just doesn't seem to have good taste.

Well ... that is interesting because Gaiman does seem to like an awful lot of the same writers Lewis did: Chesterton, Lindsay, and MacDonald have all had their tributes in his work. I would very much like to read what Gaiman has to say about CSL!

p.s. I am writing from hell, of course, so it should be perfectly obvious
I am not a sheep in wolf's clothing.

?

p.p.s. if you are looking to avoid a heated debate on Tolkien and Lewis's "racial agenda", do not ask me if I think Lord of the Rings or Narnia is about the crusades or the Moors.

You seem to be asking to be asked, so I'll ask ...

(For me, I think that there's an obvious Moorishness, or perhaps Turkishness, to the Calormenes. I suspect you could make a case for the "swarthy" Easterlings in LotR, but I also suspect that that case would always remain somewhat problematic.)

p.p.p.s If Barliman does not deliver this, I will roast him.

Well, someone delivered it!

--Dan'I

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer
"Saddam would still be in power if he were the President of the United States, and the world would be a lot better off."
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Nathan Spears — 29 Nov 2004, 13:11 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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H'mm. Having just finished The Scar, I have to admit that I don't get much of that. I don't actually get much serious political content in his novels at all; mostly a sense of "Wow, look how grotesque this is!" which was enough to carry Perdido Street Station but not a second book, so that The Scar stayed on my backburner until I

was well over halfway through it.

I just wanted to interject a quick comment. Having read several interviews with Mieville, I think that he is very interested in how his worlds function, and specifically, how the politics work. Now, I might be getting myself in trouble, because I can't remember how much intelligent discussion of M's work I've actually read on this list, but here's what I remember:

He doesn't like the fantasy tradition of having an aristocratic society living on air; for instance, in Tolkien, he would be wary of the inhabitants of Minas Tirath. What do they do? How do they get food, support an economy, etc? I think I remember reading about how he laid out a whole economic and political (ecopolitical?) foundation for his world before he started setting the story. In fact, I read some comments which made a pretty strong case for the idea that M's world, and the creatures that inhabit it, are more interesting/important than the stories he tells there. I have a feeling someone said that on this list.

Personally, I didn't care much for Perdido, and I haven't made time for The Scar yet. I just wanted to get the idea out there that the person you were responding to is (might be) pretty close to the mark with his summary of Mieville, especially from Mieville's own viewpoint.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Nov 2004, 15:08 · in reply to Nathan Spears

On Mon, 29 Nov 2004 13:11:17 -0800 (PST), Nathan Spears

<spearofsolomon at yahoo.com> wrote:

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That much is clearly true. In fact, there are times when he comes parlously close to Poughkeepsie, to borrow Le Guin's trope.

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That's a common and rather false criticism of Tolkien and tLotR. It isn't emphasized, but Tolkien does in fact mention the farming communities of Gondor in several places. Minas Tirith supports itself much the way, say, Imperial Rome or medieval Paris did - by being a center of trade and governance, and a military capital.

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It probably wasn't me, but I agree with whoever said it. The stories are actually fairly kludgy. Reading PSS I remember thinking "There isn't a single character in this book I like, let alone identify with." While this is not true of The Scar, it's badly imbalanced in terms of pacing - the first half of the book drags

on, the second half rips along; it took me less time to read the entire last half than any fifty pages of the first half. The first hundred pages or so could easily (and imio should have) been cut by a sympathetic editor to about twenty, as much of it is just moody stage setting; in fact, the first part could have been done away with easily, and the few bits that remained significant for the rest of the book worked in as flashbacks. Mieville is a relentlessly _linear_ storyteller; I don't recall a significant flashback in either of the two books I've read.

[...] the person you were responding to is (might be) pretty close to the mark with his summary of Mieville, especially from Mieville's own viewpoint.

He might well. I'm not saying that there is no serious political content; I'm saying that I'm not finding it. The internal politics of Bas-Lag seem sufficiently alien that I don't find much, as Tolkien called it, _applicability_ - let alone allegory! - to the "real" world.

--Dan'l

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stilskin — 29 Nov 2004, 16:42 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Mieville's new novel almost suffocates under all the political baggage, and it is constructed as a series of flashbacks . . .

Paul

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:
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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Nov 2004, 17:20 · in reply to stilskin

Oh. Oh, well, so much for that theory...

On Mon, 29 Nov 2004 16:42:31 -0800 (PST), stilskin <[acronus at yahoo.com](mailto:acronus@yahoo.com)> wrote:
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Lisa Schaffer-Doggett — 29 Nov 2004, 19:13 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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He doesn't like the fantasy tradition of having an aristocratic society living on air; for instance, in Tolkien, he would be wary of the inhabitants of Minas Tirath. What do they do? How do they get food, support an economy, etc?

That's a common and rather false criticism of Tolkien and *_tLotR_*. It isn't emphasized, but Tolkien does in fact mention the farming communities of Gondor in several places. Minas Tirith supports itself much the way, say, Imperial Rome or medieval Paris did - by being a center of trade and governance, and a military capital.

Don pipes in:

Yes, I think an argument can be made that LotR isn't even fantasy in the way it's understood now. You might as well ask about the system of grain distribution in Camelot or Geatland as expect that sort of thing from Tolkien. Not Important To The STORY. But what's that, anyway? Besides, Tolkien's passion was philology, not politics, and I'm sure if the tables were turned, Mieville would fall short there. (no good saying language is less important than politics or economics. It might be more important)

Lisa Schaffer-Doggett — 29 Nov 2004, 19:27 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Monday, November 29, 2004, at 11:55 AM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

I want to contrast Narnia with Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. I absolutely loved the series, and waited the five years until the last book with

bated breath. The Amber Spyglass which turned out to be nothing more than a refutation of Christianity.

Well, I think there was a _bit_ more to it than that, but certainly I have to agree that the series turns into fairly blatant Gnostic agitprop no later than the beginning of _TAS_. (Which makes it interesting read to read it against - he said, desperately dragging Wolfe into a discussion on the Urth list - the _Long Sun_ series, which I have argued is an instantiation of a Gnostic cosmology within the larger context of a Christian cosmology.)

Having just started the Wizard and having just read Pullman's trilogy I feel I can safely say that, as much as I dug the characters in HDM, Wolfe could have fit the entire story into two chapters of Long Sun. Of course he would have scattered it across four books, in pieces and allusions, and we'd never be entirely sure who Lyra's parents were or that lorek Byrnison was indeed a bear, but . . . Well, never mind.

Don

Thomas Bitterman — 30 Nov 2004, 10:23 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

(For me, I think that there's an obvious Moorishness, or perhaps Turkishness, to the Calormenes. I suspect you could make a case for the "swarthy" Easterlings in LotR, but I also suspect that that case would always remain somewhat problematic.)

I have a dim recollection that Tolkien mentioned (in a letter to a potential publisher) that the Easterlings were meant to resemble Eastern Europeans.

--Dan'I

Enamel

Eric Mattingly — 30 Nov 2004, 10:54 · in reply to turin

Hi. I am new to this site. This discussion interests me and I will toss in my own "two cents" (as the kids are saying these days).

Harold Bloom spends a lot of time discussing the intertextual "agons" or battles of artistic superiority that each writer must undergo. I think his theory is more or less obtuse depending on the author, but I think that we can see something by the Bloomian book here with Mieville, Gaiman, Pullman, etc.

In my own opinion, Pullman is the best author of the three. Gaiman is a good, though undistinguished, author, and (again, in my opinion) Mieville is little more than a slightly above average hack attempting something out of his depth. In all three of these, however, one can find an impassioned-- even embittered-- agon with Tolkien and Lewis, especially Tolkien. It is the old Freudian story of the sons murdering the father in order to possess the mother and limit his influence (i.e. Totem and Taboo). The irony is that they fail on both counts and make even stronger (though now with a neurotic dimension) the influence Tolkien has over them. I agree with Turin that we cannot over-psychoanalyze an author based on their work, but maybe an author's commentary on other works is fair game.

Now, to aid in the desperate struggle of bringing Wolfe back into this. Wolfe freely admits love

and admiration for his precursor but, in the end, provides the strongest agon against him possible-- he moves speculative (for want of a better word) fiction into the realm of genuine mythical and psychological conflict. And, I would argue, in the end swallows up his precursors (Tolkien, of course, but Lewis too among others) and displaces them. That is of course contingent upon whether or not you consider Wolfe the best sci-fi and fantasy writer (which I do). The three writers in question do not, I believe, have any hope of surviving an agon with Wolfe. Pullman is cool, though. Only he has the potential to survive the agon with Tolkien and Lewis (though HDM does not, in the end because of its ending).

Thanks,

eric

A heretic is a man who sees with his own eyes.

-- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

From: turin <turin at HELL.COM>

Reply-To: turin at HELL.COM,The Urth Mailing List
<urth-urth.net at lists.urth.net>

To: urth-urth.net at lists.urth.net

Subject: (urth) the problem with gaiman, mieville, and pullman

Date: Mon, 29 Nov 2004 01:37:29 -0800 (PST)

I am leery of message boards, considering they often turn into screaming matches which would probably happen less if the people talking could see each other face to face, but Urth seems like a decent place, except of course for the dying sun and the forces of Abaia, Erebus, etc.

Someone mentioned earlier that it has become a fashion lately to attack Lewis's work. Despite my own problems with Lewis's particular worldview, I have read essay by Neil Gaiman, China Mieville, and Phillip Pullman which were written basically to "debunk" Lewis and for Mieville Tolkien as well. Charges of racism, nostalgia, cruelty, etc , I don't think you can psychoanalyze an author from her work, and I was particularly disappointed in Gaiman's reaction. I mean, yes Narnia is less of an allegory than the Faerie Queene though much more of an allegory than Lord of the Rings, which Tolkien denied having any allegorical structure whatsoever.

Allegory is a very nebulous concept, though, we can call Mieville work Marxist romanticism or capitalist dystopia if we want, and Pullman age of enlightenment identity myth, and Gaiman neo-pagan mall mythology. Lewis cannibalizes things in Theosophy or Voyage to Arcturus or Lord Dunsany, Gaiman cannibalizes Roger Zelazny etc. Really we can replace cannibalize with "is paying attention to or concerned with" or "is influenced by" and instead of saying "allegory" we can say it is similar to narratives with similar content and dynamics. This is not what Gaiman et al. are doing. They are merely drawing a line between what they consider to be "leftist" or "liberal" fantasy, and "conservative" fantasy like Tolkien and Lewis, more so with Lewis. I find this appalling. I am not a Christian, and my pride is not hurt that they would try to detract from what they feel is Tolkien and Lewis's hegemony of "fantasy" literature. I do happen to think Tolkien and Lewis are more intelligent writers than their detractors, but this is besides the point. What I find appalling is the open and deliberate politization of literature, is literature for its own sake or for furthering ideology. It is a serious problem whether you consider Narnia

to be Christian propaganda or not; but I find it more difficult with the Science Fiction Trilogy or Till We Have Faces. What exactly is propaganda is another difficult problem. I certainly did not feel like Lewis was trying to evangelize me. The novel that is most often cited is The Last Battle, but as an eight year old I knew the Emperor from across the sea was probably some sort of God, but I just took the whole thing as story and that's how I still read it, and it never "softened" me up to Mere Christianity, so I don't understand what everyone's complaint is. Lewis's observations concerning human psychology seem very persuasive to me if not always the conclusions he draws from them.

I want to contrast Narnia with Pullman's His Dark Materials. I absolutely loved the series, and waited the five years until the last book with bated breath. The Amber Spyglass which turned out to be nothing more than a refutation of Christianity. I felt like he was preaching to me, and there are rumors he trashed the first manuscript, so I can only wonder what the book's first form was. Why use magic or talking polar bears to promote rationalism? Is it because he thought children will read them along with Lewis and create a politically balanced genre.

To a certain degree I am biased, I will admit, because I think Wolfe, Lewis, Chesterton, Tolkien ask serious questions that Gaiman, Pullman, and Mieville do not, other "fantacists", I am excluding "science fiction", do not. Questions of metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, what it means to be human, what it means to be a nonhuman person, the problem of technology and how to use it, etc. Mieville, Gaiman, and Pullman seem to address these issues, but it does not seem to me as if their attempts are anything other than cursory. Despite how "liberal" I may be or how "Christian" Lewis is, the fact remains I think he is a better thinker than the rest of them. I feel that this writers who just so happen to be Christian make serious commitments to this questions which means trying to answer them honestly and to a certain degree means revealing in part some of their Christian beliefs. With Mieville and Pullman it seems as if they are only trying to further political agendas primarily, the stories come second, and because they pretend to be good humanists, it's okay to indulge in the same "escapist" fantasy they attribute to Tolkien and Lewis, very hypocritical. Gaiman seems not to want to commit to anything, and to this day, I have no idea what Gaiman thinks about anything, except that he probably voted for Kerry. I do not understand why they started attacking Lewis simultaneously, was it jealousy, the impending Lord of the Rings movie, which I can't stand, or some weird statistical nodal point. That they were trying to debunk Lewis or steal his "throne" is ridiculous. There is nothing to debunk or steal. I don't believe science fiction and fantasy are secretly plagued by Christianity and a conservative political agenda, and I find that kind of thinking supercilious and disappointing.

I am of course open to debate on this subject and will try not to snap. I haven't gotten a chance to read "the problem of Susan yet" but I've read an essay Gaiman wrote on his feelings towards Lewis before he wrote the story and it feels very much like it would be a piece of propaganda to me. I don't know how Gaiman can hate Lewis and like Michael Moorcock. He just doesn't seem to have good taste.

p.s. I am writing from hell, of course, so it should be perfectly obvious I am not a sheep in wolf's clothing.

p.p.s. if you are looking to avoid a heated debate on Tolkien and Lewis's

"racial agenda", do not ask me if I think Lord of the Rings or Narnia is about the crusades or the Moors.

p.p.p.s If Barliman does not deliver this, I will roast him.

James Wynn — 30 Nov 2004, 11:05 · in reply to Eric Mattingly

Crush is giddy about learning a new useful word:

ag?on (P) Pronunciation Key (gn, -n, ?-gn)

n. pl. a?gon?es (-gnz)

1.. A conflict, especially between the protagonist and antagonist in a work of literature.

2.. The part of an ancient Greek drama, especially a comedy, in which two characters engage in verbal dispute.

3.. A test of will; a conflict: "Freud's originality stemmed from his aggression and ambition in his agon with biology" (Harold Bloom).

4.. A contest in ancient Greece, as in athletics or music, in which prizes were awarded.

[Greek agn. See agony.]

~ Crush

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

From: "Eric Mattingly" <eric_mattingly at hotmail.com>

To: <urth-urth.net at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2004 1:53 PM

Subject: RE: (urth) the problem with gaiman, mieville, and pullman

Hi. I am new to this site. This discussion interests me and I will toss in

my own "two cents" (as the kids are saying these days).

Harold Bloom spends a lot of time discussing the intertextual "agons" or battles of artistic superiority that each writer must undergo. I think his

theory is more or less obtuse depending on the author, but I think that we can see something by the Bloomian book here with Mieville, Gaiman, Pullman, etc.

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In my own opinion, Pullman is the best author of the three. Gaiman is

a good, though undistinguished, author, and (again, in my opinion) Mieville is little more than a slightly above average hack attempting something out of his depth. In all three of these, however, one can find an impassioned-- even embittered-- agon with Tolkien and Lewis, especially Tolkien. It is the old Freudian story of the sons murdering the father in order to possess the mother and limit his influence (i.e. Totem and Taboo). The irony is that they fail on both counts and make even stronger (though now with a neurotic dimension) the influence Tolkien has over them. I agree with Turin that we cannot over-psychoanalyze an author based on their work, but maybe an author's commentary on other works is fair game.

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Don (who's still a kid I suppose) tosses in his coppers:

I like this a lot. Ahab vs the white whale. Quinn vs the shark. Maybe they should've stayed on shore and opened a bait shop. . . I mean there's a reason the stories are called by the name of the behemoths and not by their stalkers.

Matthew Malthouse — 30 Nov 2004, 12:17 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

At 23:07 29/11/2004, Dan'l wrote:

[On Mi?ville's viewpoint and politics]

He might well. I'm not saying that there is no serious political content; I'm saying that I'm not finding it. The internal politics of Bas-Lag seem sufficiently alien that I don't find much, as Tolkien called it, _applicability_ - let alone allegory! - to the "real" world.

I wonder if this might be because Mi?ville's political activity is in a minor left-wing British party that simply isn't recognisable (or even recognisable as politics) divorced from its context. The printing of subversive pamphlets and broad sheets, the workers movements and conflict that appear both in Perdido and Iron Council scream (simplistic and quasi-violent) politics to my English sensibilities. They're the idiots I went to college with who'd swallowed the implausible logic of the party leaders wholesale.

A couple of months ago, immediately before I read Iron Council, I attended a bookshop reading where Mi?ville answered questions. Two things he said stay with me. First that he said of himself that he's a literary kleptomaniac, coming across an idea or thing he fancies he'll work it in. Basilisk? Nice, have some of them. Golem? Spider? space warp? memory drug? mechanical intelligence? throw 'em all in. And you can see it, pick out the "cute ideas" if you want to.

The other was that he wrote Iron Council because he wanted to write a western (cowboys and

indians) but as a fantasy because verisimilitude wasn't his thing - the myth of the Wild West was something he wanted to use but not a genre he wanted to enter directly.

Having heard that I recognised it. But I don't know if I would have done otherwise. The religious impetus of the builder to drive across Bas-Lag in place of the capitalist expansion only makes a good metaphor if you agree with his political position that capitalism is inherently destructive. The Lone Ranger subverted is a twist, if an implausible one, on the myth. The hero against all odds shouldn't lose. The uprising doesn't have a place. The mayoralty of New Crobuzon is an inadequate allegory of East Coast politics unless your own view places you so far outside of that politics that you can't examine its detail so fall back on defining it as evil without explication.

I like Mi?ville; I like what he writes albeit Iron Council was rather less fun than either Perdido Street Station or The Scar. But they are fun rather than great. He isn't nearly such a good writer as he'd like to think he is and extending his kleptomania to Tolkein or Peake isn't sufficient to put him in their league.

Matthew

Charles Reed — 06 Dec 2004, 11:23 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
<snip>

Someone mentioned earlier that it has become a fashion lately to attack Lewis's work.

That would be me. I've seen it all over the place but especially in the "Gaiman generation."

Despite my own problems with Lewis's particular worldview, I have read essay by Neil Gaiman, China Mieville, and Phillip Pullman which were written basically to "debunk" Lewis and for Mieville Tolkien as well.

I would very much like a pointer to Gaiman's essay, as up to now I have only his fictions to base this on. (Not only "The Problem of Susan," but also the _Sandman_ arc "A Game of You," which has some details that have always seemed to me to be idle passing swipes at the Narnia books.)

It had been quite a while since I last read A GAME OF YOU, but I couldn't recall any "swipes" at the Narnia books, so I took the opportunity to re-read it, and still couldn't find anything I would call classify as being derogatory toward Narnia. Do you recall anything specific that made you think so?

There are some obvious Narnia references (as well as plenty Oz and Middle-Earth references), with the most obvious being the sequence toward the end where Barbie's dream world comes to an end. This is very much an echo of Narnia's end in THE LAST BATTLE, but I couldn't detect any Narnia references in the writing that would not be considered an homage.

I did a little googling on the web, and came across a speech that Gaiman gave at Mythcon 35 (the Mythopoeic Society's big shindig) in 2004, in which he says some very complimentary things regarding C. S. Lewis. I hope I'm not violating any copyright by quoting the entire Narnia passage:

I was six years old when I saw an episode of The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe in black and

white on television at my grandmother's house in Portsmouth. I remember the beavers, and the first appearance of Aslan, an actor in an unconvincing lion costume, standing on his hind legs, from which I deduce that this was probably episode two or three. I went home to Sussex and saved my meagre pocket money until I was able to buy a copy of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* of my own. I read it, and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the other book I could find, over and over, and when my seventh birthday arrived I had dropped enough hints that my birthday present was a boxed set of the complete Narnia books. And I remember what I did on my seventh birthday -- I lay on my bed and I read the books all through, from the first to the last.

For the next four or five years I continued to read them. I would read other books, of course, but in my heart I knew that I read them only because there wasn't an infinite number of Narnia books to read.

For good or ill the religious allegory, such as it was, went entirely over my head, and it was not until I was about twelve that I found myself realising that there were Certain Parallels. Most people get it at the Stone Table; I got it when it suddenly occurred to me that the story of the events that occurred to Saint Paul on the road to Damascus was the dragoning of Eustace Scrubb all over again. I was personally offended: I felt that an author, whom I had trusted, had had a hidden agenda. I had nothing against religion, or religion in fiction -- I had bought (in the school bookshop) and loved *The Screwtape Letters*, and was already dedicated to G.K. Chesterton. My upset was, I think, that it made less of Narnia for me, it made it less interesting a thing, less interesting a place. Still, the lessons of Narnia sank deep. Aslan telling the Tash worshippers that the prayers he had given to Tash were actually prayers to Him was something I believed then, and ultimately still believe.

The Pauline Baynes map of Narnia poster stayed up on my bedroom wall through my teenage years.

I didn't return to Narnia until I was a parent, first in 1988, then in 1999, each time reading all the books aloud to my children. I found that the things that I loved, I still loved -- sometimes loved more -- while the things that I had thought odd as a child (the awkwardness of the structure of *Prince Caspian*, and my dislike for most of *The Last Battle*, for example) had intensified; there were also some new things that made me really uncomfortable -- for example the role of women in the Narnia books, culminating in the disposition of Susan. But what I found more interesting was how much of the Narnia books had crept inside me: as I would write there would be moment after moment of realising that I'd borrowed phrases, rhythms, the way that words were put together; for example, that I had a hedgehog and a hare, in *The Books of Magic*, speaking and agreeing with each other much as the Dufflepuds do.

C.S. Lewis was the first person to make me want to be a writer. He made me aware of the writer, that there was someone standing behind the words, that there was someone telling the story. I fell in love with the way he used parentheses -- the auctorial asides that were both wise and chatty, and I rejoiced in using such brackets in my own essays and compositions through the rest of my childhood.

I think, perhaps, the genius of Lewis was that he made a world that was more real to me than the one I lived in; and if authors got to write the tales of Narnia, then I wanted to be an author.

The rest of the speech is worth reading (mainly about Tolkien and Chesterton), so if you want to read the entire speech, here's the link: <http://www.mythsoc.org/gaiman.htm>

Charles

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 06 Dec 2004, 12:14 · in reply to Charles Reed

H'mmmm.

Well, it seems very unlikely to me that Gaiman would say much uncomplimentary about CSL (or JRRT) as the invited guest of the Mythopoeic Society, an organization created specifically for the study of the works of the Inklings: it would be akin to accepting a dinner invitation and getting up after the appetizer and starting to make rude remarks about your host's mother.

That he says as much as he does (about being "personally offended," about feeling that CSL had violated his trust, about the "awkwardness" of the structure of _Prince Caspian_) in such a context leads me to believe that he might have quite a bit more to say in a less Lewicentric forum.

Still, what he _does_ say makes it clear that he loves, or at some point loved, those books, and that's worth knowing.

Thanks.

--Dan'I

www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer

Freedom has no barcode.

--J.G. Ballard

Charles Reed — 06 Dec 2004, 12:22 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I also thought it to be quite telling that he (Gaiman) chose to read the Narnia books to his two children. If a person is virulently against the message conveyed in a certain book, there's no way in the world they're going to be reading those books to the most precious people in their lives.

Charles

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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Still, what he _does_ say makes it clear that he loves, or at some point loved, those books, and that's worth knowing.

Thanks.

--Dan'l

Fred Kiesche — 06 Dec 2004, 12:44 · follows Charles Reed

Greetings:

When I read Gaiman's "Coraline" (I think that's how he spelled it), I was reminded very much of C.S. Lewis.

The same with Pullman and the "Dark Materials" books. I was reminded of Lewis.

Given some of the comments reported here from those authors about Lewis, et al, it's kind of interesting that I got that reaction (I read the books before I read those comments).

=====

Fred Kiesche (FPK3)

My books are water; those of great geniuses are wine. Everybody drinks water. (Mark Twain, "Notebook")

Science, science fiction and more. See The Eternal Golden Braid.
(<http://theeternalgoldenbraid.blogspot.com/>)

Tony Ellis — 07 Dec 2004, 11:52 · in reply to Charles Reed

Thank you for that Gaiman quote, Charles.

I found it very interesting - but then I would, since Gaiman's take on Lewis and Narnia seems to be an exact match for mine. But I also think it shines a useful light on what has been posted here previously.