

Newbie - a theory and some questions.

The Urth list — 8 messages, 7 voices, 14 Mar 2005

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4374>

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Andrew Kertesz — 14 Mar 2005, 04:31

Hello everyone,

I'm a student from Australia, and I've just discovered this mailing list after a holiday well spent on a Gene Wolfe binge: I devoured the BotNS in a few days after Christmas, and was - to put it mildly - awed. I promptly ordered UotNS, Long Sun, and Short Sun.

At the moment, I'm nearly through a "refresher" re-reading of the BotNS, in anticipation of starting UotNS (the rest of the books waiting in a pile on my floor), and I've come to you with a few questions that have been nagging me. In exchange, however, I thought I'd offer a theory that I've developed during my second reading.

First, my theory - one that revolves around the issue of Agilus' mask. It's nothing groundbreaking, and forgive me if this one has already been floated, but I'm comparatively new to this ;)

We know that the Cacogens are not a single, unified, race - for example, the Heirodules Ossipago, Barbatus and Famulimus are described, in *Sword of the Lictor*, as quite different from one another:

"One, if he had been truly a human being, would have been short and stout. The other two were a good head taller than I, as tall as exultants... The masks all three wore gave them the faces of refined men of middle age, thoughtful and poised; but I was aware that the eyes that looked out through the slits in the masks of the two taller figures were larger than human eyes, and that the shorter figure had no eyes at all, so that only darkness was visible there."

There are other references in the series which refer to the Cacogens as "races from beyond the stars" - none of which I can find on a quick flip through.

If we accept that the Cacogens are not identical, or even unified, then why not assume that Agilus is a member of another "race" of Cacogen? It is possible that he differs from the three Heirodules (in that his disguise is more efficient, his motives more opaque, and his nature less trustworthy), yet is in other ways, similar to them. Like Ossipago et. al, he wears a series of masks (as the "black ribbon" indicates). However, he appears to wear his masks in a different fashion...

The Heirodules wear, firstly, a "human" mask, which conceals a monstrous mask, which, in turn, conceals their true (super) humanity. On the other hand, when Severian fist meets Agilus, the shopkeeper wears a death's mask, which conceals a face identical to Agia's.

A pattern could be imposed on this:

The Heirodules wear:

- 1) Human mask
- 2) Inhuman mask
- 3) Human face

Agilus wears:

- 1) Inhuman mask
- 2) Human mask
- 3)?

I think that Agilus' "Agia" face conceals his true, inhuman face – and, in this way, he is an inverse of the Heirodules – an anti-Heirodule, if you will. In keeping with this, his role in the narrative seems to be a negative one, or at least antagonistic.

I don't know how one could expand on this theory though... Is Agilus openly against the New Sun (it seems like his sister is – but is she a Cacogen too?) or is he merely a bystander who becomes caught up in the story? I'm not sure, but I think the general conceit of the theory is neat, at least.

Ok, so on to my questions:

1) Is the boatman who sails the Gyoll (he helped rescue Severian from drowning in Shadow of the Torturer and, later, ferried Severian to Dorcas's house in Citadel of the Autarch) Jonas? His speech patterns suggest so, as do some of his comments – but if so, who is his "niece", who rides with him in Citadel?

2) Who/what is Erebus? I was never very clear on this.

3) Is Abia an alien, or was it once an "enhanced" human, like its handmaidens and Baldanders?

If any of these are answered in UotNS, Long, or Short, a simple "wait and see" is all that is required.

Well, that's enough for now – I hope my theory is somewhat constructive, and that you guys can help me with these niggling questions.

Finally, and most importantly – pleased to meet you!

Sincerely,
Andrew Kertesz

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 14 Mar 2005, 10:20 · in reply to Andrew Kertesz

Welcome to some very good reading.

Regarding the Cacos – one of them is of the same nature as Jonas.

Interesting point about Agilus' mask. Masks in general are a huge theme in tBotNS (the torturer's uniform includes one...)

Regarding your questions. "Wait and see" is semi-appropriate. I will see if I can give you spoiler-free answers.

1) Is the boatman who sails the Gyoll (he helped rescue Severian from drowning in Shadow of the Torturer and, later, ferried Severian to Dorcas's house in Citadel of the Autarch) Jonas? His speech patterns suggest so, as do some of his comments — but if so, who is his "niece", who rides with him in Citadel?

The speech patterns seem to be generic to sailors in the Urth part of this universe.

2) Who/what is Erebus? I was never very clear on this.

3) Is Abia an alien, or was it once an "enhanced" human, like its handmaidens and Baldanders?

This is a good example of the kind of thing you have to glerk from context in Wolfe - he gives you the pieces, but you have to assemble the puzzle yourself.

Erebus and Abaia are both huge alien(?) beings -- the sort of thing that Baldanders may become in time - who play chess with humans as pieces. Erebus lives at the South Pole, near the mountain of the same name; Abaia lives under the sea. There is a third, if you can catch the name.

Welcome aboard.

--Dan'I (Blattid)

You probably do not want to know what that odor is.

maru — 14 Mar 2005, 14:40 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

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What makes you think Erebus/Abaia are aliens (cacogens)?

Is it just because Baldanders seems to be like them, and non-human (which would explain why the cacogens take such trouble to teach him.)?

That said,: There was a third!?!

~Maru

Looks like I'll be re-reading it; makes me glad I dropped the money and actually bought'em, as is not my wont.

Chris — 14 Mar 2005, 15:21 · in reply to maru

Abaia, Erebus & co. were described as aliens, if you believe the origin story of where they came from. I am not 100% sure it is accurate to call them "cacogens", because "cacogens" seems to have a more specific connotation than simply any and all types of alien.

Alien or not, at Baldander's castle mention is also made of the life cycle of his people/species/type (which is where the connection is made to Abaia/Erebus/etc), which does distinguish them as non-human at the very least.

I remember that there was a third, but I cannot remember its name.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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Samuel L. — 14 Mar 2005, 15:45 · in reply to Chris

Scylla?

On Mon, 14 Mar 2005 23:21:36 +0000, Chris <rasputin_ at hotmail.com> wrote:
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mournings glory — 14 Mar 2005, 16:35 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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There is actually a fourth: Arioch (IV, chap 1). And Blaithmaic's book in the library of the Citadel, Lives of the Seventeen Megatherians, suggests there may be as many as 13 more--all (or mostly?) unnamed.

msg

James Wynn — 14 Mar 2005, 16:53 · in reply to Chris

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Well, "non-human" *now* perhaps. I understood that Baldanders' growth was technologically induced in a bid for eternal life.

Welcome, Andrew. Perhaps you will be the one to finally straighten all this out.

~ Crush

maru — 19 Mar 2005, 20:57 · in reply to Andrew Kertesz

Andrew Kertesz wrote:
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Sounds like Raynor would like to chat wi' you :)

But seriously, if Agilus was a cacogen, and one that was opposed to the New Sun, wouldn't he be associated with Typhon and the magicians with claws (Side note: I actually own a pair of those weapons.

Wolfe doesn't mention that their primary use these days is for climbing vertically (usually paired with a set for the feet as well.) not self-defense, though I understand the ninja made heavy use of shuko. This suggests an interesting thought to me: the cosmogony is up=good, and the magicians seek to gain power by putting the New Sun, thereby rising. Or climbing. Hmm.... But if you want to use them, you really gotta add padding. End digression.) , since if he is indeed a anti-cacogen (insofar only as his goals are different. I don't think he would be a creature even lower than Urthians. Doesn't seem fitting somehow) his goals would coincide with the two previously mentioned groups.

Further, one would expect his execution by Severian to be fraught with significance, or at least far deeper than meets the eye. Now, I'm not particularly sharp in that arena (I am told I missed essentially everything in the BotLS) so take my words with some salt, but I saw no more than the usual human drama in it.

Finally, if your ideas hold up, Agilus would almost have to be a loathsome creature below humanity and far below the cacogens we see directly, since the cacogens original mask though a lie, ironically turns out to be the truth; by analogy, the 'inhuman' mask of Agilus would 'ironically turns out to be the truth', making hime inhuman.

~Maru