

New Wolfe story: The Gunner's Mate (timothy fletcher)

The Urth list — 62 messages, 15 voices, 16 Oct 2005

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4500>

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Kip T — 16 Oct 2005, 07:37

I was a little disappointed with the story. I thought it was good, but not Wolfe-good, with evolving characters and discovered worlds, like 'Golden City Far' or 'The Tree is my Hat' or a few dozen others. If there was more to the story, hidden references or whatever, I missed it. I guessed the ending early and kept reading hoping I was wrong. I wasn't.

It is a fine ghost story, but a merely good story from the master is somewhat dissapointing.

Matt Sab — 17 Oct 2005, 15:18 · in reply to Kip T

In this month's Harper's magazine, Ben Marcus rips into Jonathan Franzen in "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It."

The Valve's discussion of the essay has an unexpected Gene Wolfe appearance:

I read very little poetry by design and constitution. I lack the patience required to work through poetry if it lacks the puzzling qualities I value in writers like Joyce. (I mean "puzzling" literally there, as in "like a puzzle" which I'm enjoined to put back together. Hence my love/hate relationship with Gene Wolfe.)

Full text here:

http://www.thevalve.org/go/valve/article/aggressively_masturbatory_fiction_or_two_authors_enter_only_ben_marcus_may_l/

Adam Stephanides — 22 Oct 2005, 01:35 · follows Matt Sab

On the personal blog of the person who wrote that post, there are two other posts on Wolfe:

http://acephalous.typepad.com/acephalous/2005/09/on_terrible_neo.html

and

http://acephalous.typepad.com/acephalous/2005/09/rich_on_wolfe.html

Both are followed by contentious discussions (the latter of which I participated in).

--Adam

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

From: Matt Sab <mbs808 at yahoo.com>

Sent: Oct 17, 2005 9:18 AM

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Subject: (urth) Marcus v. Franzen = Unexpected Wolfe sighting

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Chris — 22 Oct 2005, 03:10 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

I can barely stand to read half of these posts. And the most cretinous ones (if that is a word, and if I am using it correctly) don't seem worth responding to, because they reflect opinions held by people so certain of their own infallible faculty of interpretation that they are impervious to correction.

As far as your own posts, Adam, I have my own problems with The Knight but the ones you immediately bring up are not among them. The fact that Able is so clearly portrayed as a punk or a creep is not a coincidence, and indicates that Wolfe intends to give us this impression. So I don't think Wolfe intends to portray Able as, or have us think of Able as "the bees-knees". Other characters in the novel clearly do, however, and part of the (overwrought) point is to lead one to examine just why that is.

I am not sure how to make the connection explicit, but I can't help thinking of my reaction when I first read Homer: something about the idolization of Achilles just didn't connect. Attempting to understand this leads to a kind of understanding of the ancient Greeks, and of people in general.

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<http://www.yahoo.com/r/hs>

Seth Lombardi — 23 Oct 2005, 21:02 · follows Chris

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the (overwrought) point is to lead one to examine just why that is.

I also felt Able was portrayed purposefully as having serious problems: after all, he ends the book living in a world below human, with his sub-human semi-imaginary girlfriend. In some way I took Able's limitations as being a commentary on the limited (to Wolfe) heights of pagan, pre-Christian heroics and morality, and in the same sense simple human limitations and mixed motivations for doing good and winning the girl.

As for Rich's comments in the blog: I wouldn't go as far as to resort to name-calling but he seems to be falling into the trap of deconstructing sexual "weaknesses" out of the text, images and subtext that very well be there... but fail, for me, to somehow shame me out of enjoying a work.

seth

Seth Lombardi

sethlombardi at hotmail.com

<http://sethlombardi.blogspot.com/>

AIM: melombardi

"Two faces are alike; neither is funny by itself, but side by side their likeness makes us laugh"

-Pascal

Yves Meynard — 24 Oct 2005, 03:55 · follows Seth Lombardi

Chris says:

I can barely stand to read half of these posts. And the most cretinous ones (if that is a word, and if I am using it correctly) don't seem worth responding to, because they reflect opinions held by people so certain of their own infallible faculty of interpretation that they are impervious to correction.

It's a real word, but you're only technically correct if their authors suffer from severe thyroid deficiency.

And yes, debating feels utterly pointless here -- though I do welcome Adam's contributions.

Now, Rich Puchalsky says:

The basic conceit of the books is taken from Yves Meynard's *The Book of Knights* (a much better book).

The first part of this statement is factually incorrect as far as I know, since Wolfe had already begun work on *The Wizard Knight* long before he ever read TBoK. Then again, there are some clear parallels

-- I am ill-suited to judge those objectively. And I did not ask Wolfe to tell me what exactly he had taken from my book, so I'm not sure how much of influence TBoK was. I've actually channeled Wolfe before, publishing a story set in a starship with a linear sun, with strong religious themes, shortly before *Nightside the Long Sun* appeared. Make of that what you will.

As regards the second part of the statement, I shall keep silent.

Off to wash my studded codpiece,

Yves Meynard

Bob Miller — 24 Oct 2005, 08:57 · in reply to Seth Lombardi

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Andy Robertson — 25 Oct 2005, 20:56 · in reply to Seth Lombardi

Seth Lombardi writes:

In some way I took Able's limitations
as being a commentary on the limited (to Wolfe) heights of pagan,
pre-Christian heroics and morality. . . .

What you say makes sense, but what of the men and women in Midgarthyr who show unqualified heroism: especially Idunn? Is she also so flawed, and the Valfather's blessing on her also a joke?

I note that the pre-Christians also saw their gods as sometimes buffoons. It seems to be Thor/Thunnor's main role.

David DiGiacomo — 25 Oct 2005, 21:31 · follows Andy Robertson

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pre-Christian heroics and morality. . . .

What you say makes sense, but what of the men and women in Midgarthyr who show unqualified heroism: especially Idunn? Is she also so flawed, and the Valfather's blessing on her also a joke?

Idnn was an opportunist who cared only about becoming queen. The frost giant women who followed her died for nothing, as did Garvaon.

So yes, that part of the story does support Seth Lombardi's theory.

Idnn was virtuous by the standards of the Valfather, but not by those of the higher worlds.

Chris — 26 Oct 2005, 02:55 · in reply to Yves Meynard

Yves said:

I said:

cretinous ones
It's a real word, but you're only technically correct if their
authors suffer from severe thyroid deficiency.

I can't decide whether that's a really good or a really terrible joke. Either way, admirable.

sure how much of influence TBoK was. I've actually channeled Wolfe before, publishing a story set in a starship with a linear sun, with strong religious themes, shortly before _Nightside the Long Sun_ appeared. Make of that what you will.

I am interested, where might I find a copy of that story?

Chris

James Wynn — 26 Oct 2005, 03:07 · in reply to David DiGiacomo

Idnn was an opportunist who cared only about becoming queen.
The frost giant women who followed her died for nothing, as did
Garvaon.

I'm simply appalled at this interpretation. As I recall, all she wanted nothing more than to get out of it. After the marriage took place she chose to do her duty. (Think of it as Jesus asking for "the cup to pass him") That was why Valfather honored her. Because knighthood is more than jousting and fighting.

The frost giants did not do their duty by their queen. Honor was not in their nature. The frost giant women did. Garvaon did not do his duty either and dishonored himself; he knew it and sought a way to regain his honor.

I don't think Idunn could have shown anymore honor than she did in Mythgathr. She would have to ascend to Skai to do that.

(BTW, I appreciate Wolfe's desire to show that redemption is possible ala the case of Garvaon--not something apparent in Arthurian tales or Samari codes--but I'm not sure I believed it as he presented it.)

J

Chris — 26 Oct 2005, 03:30 · in reply to David DiGiacomo

It's been a while since we've had a discussion/debate going here, so I'll rummage through the closet for my pointy stick and have a go at starting something:

Seth Lombardi writes:

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pre-Christian heroics and morality. . . .

What you say makes sense, but what of the men and women in Midgarthyr who
show unqualified heroism: especially Idunn? Is she also so flawed, and
the

Valfather's blessing on her also a joke?

I don't agree with David's assessment (in almost any regard), but Idnn is certainly human. She attempts to manipulate Able to get out of her duty, and arguably attempts the same thing with Svon and even Garvaon. As a stronger statement, it was my impression that Garvaon's state of mind going into Utgard might well have been because she tried to get him to help her run off; his presumed refusal tore him up and led to his self-destructive state of mind once they actually got to Utgard.

That said I think that if we come out of the book condemning its characters for their failings then we've missed the point, and we've failed to look closely enough at ourselves.

David said:

Idnn was an opportunist who cared only about becoming queen.

This seems fairly absurd to me. Beel wanted her to be queen, and she did feel a strong sense of duty to her father. But every indication was that she was frightened of what was going to happen, and was really hoping for a way to avoid it. A significant portion of The Knight makes no sense at all if you assume she "cared only about becoming queen".

The frost giant women who followed her died for nothing,

Can you back this up? I would think that all this would depend on what the frost giant women hoped to accomplish by putting their lives on the line, and they have very little actual voice in the novels.

I'll take a crack at it myself, though perhaps others can do better. Through most of the novel the giant women are nowhere to be found. They are bigger and stronger than the men, and yet they are absolutely absent from the political landscape and pretty much have no say in matters. [Might there be a little bit of a message here?] Their rallying to the queen and fighting against the men was a sharp and defining act of **autonomy**. I don't see how their involvement can be seen as a failure from any angle.

as did Garvaon.

What **did** Garvaon die for, again? By a knight's standards there's not too many better ways to die. His name will live on in legend, and even those who knew him at the time were so moved that they stopped their flight and built an enormous monument to him.

But in general, what do knights die for? I am reminded of young Able describing Berthold to Ravd. Berthold fought to protect his village, and Gerda. Ravd replied that while Berthold was certainly brave and noble and an amazing man, because of these reasons he had for fighting he was no knight. To be a knight, apparently, is not to fight for such reasons. The pursuit of honor, as it's portrayed here, seems damn near senseless - yet of course, you can't help but feel it and understand in some sense.

I do think that the younger Berthold is meant as a contrast to the knightly ideal. And we are thus led to be a bit more conscious of the fact that from our own (modern) subjective perspective, our heroes are more like Berthold than Ravd or Garvaon or Able. And also that we know a little less about the knightly ideal than we unreflectively assume we do.

-- Chris (Civet), brandishing pointy stick

Bob Miller — 26 Oct 2005, 14:08 · in reply to Chris

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Andy Robertson — 26 Oct 2005, 19:21 · in reply to Bob Miller

Bob Miller writes:

I think your post is beautiful, Chris. I also think I have had to coalesce? codify? some of my own thoughts because of what I perceived were >>inconsequential criticisms others have made.(Able was a punk, Idnn was >>selfishly selfserving) There was a knight like Ravd, or like I think Able is on the path to becoming.y. [...]

I think Idnn was as admirable a 16 year old as we'll ever see. And so did Able. "And then I wished I were not mounted that I might kneel to her"

Fine information, Bob.

I think the real problem some suffer in understanding Abel and Idunn and other imperfect people is that we have no modern analog of what a Knight is supposed to be. What function do Knights serve? How do their rights and duties interact with those of ordinary people???

Some seem to believe that a Knight is simply a high status individual with the right to push other individuals around.

As I have posted before, a Knight is really better understood as something like white blood cell in a body, fighting off attacks on the nation in a very selfless way and rewarded for this by a complex of rights and honors that (taken alone) seem reasonless.

Hence the strong prohibitions and severe tests put in the way of any one who would attempt to gain the honor and rewards of a Knight without earning them.

A Knight's values are not those of an ordinary person: but then reputation and manners are the means by which human beings enforce behavioural standards on each other, and a leucocyte's program of behaviour is not that of an ordinary body cell.

The Giantesses' hatred for their menfolk has its root in Norse legend, but I can't easily speculate on any deeper meaning.

Roy C. Lackey — 27 Oct 2005, 07:20 · follows Andy Robertson

On 10-24-05 Bob Miller wrote:

In his failings, I find Able's personal growth, emotionally and "morally", to be one of the better thingies about the novel. He does start off as a rather confused and not particularly admirable person. However, for one it is apparent that he is showing us his "bad" side in a number of different scenes. I would rather say though that it is his human side. That he aspires, and others have faith in him, to betterment (greatness?) and others see the value there even through his flaws. In Christianity this is called grace.<<

Though I come from the opposite end of the religious spectrum, I quite agree with you, at least about that last statement. Something akin to grace is the only way to account for the literal overnight transformation of a gangly, ignorant American teenage boy into a he-man comic-book superhero who fancied himself a knight. Why did he fancy himself a knight? Because he *believed* he was a knight. He had done absolutely nothing to earn his spurs. Unless you count screwing a fairy queen.

And on 10-26-05 Bob Miller wrote:

I have two points here. One is that there is more to honor than fighting.

It required obedience. And looking at Sir Woddet and his actions to keep Able from fighting Marder, it required forethought and initiative. The other is that Wolfe's characters, as Chris noted, grow. The punk who offered to kill the boy Toug for Disiri's pleasure is a far distance from the knight who refused to go with her when she offered everything he had dreamed of (her body and company) in order to join a starving army.<<

But he was the same knight who, even in middle age after his sojourn in Skai (carousing, drinking and fighting; no finer venue for honing knightly ideals of chivalry and honor), upbraided the stable hands in Utgard for not taking better care of the horses. It takes a lot of damn gall to ride into Utgard in the middle of the night on a flying unicorn, roust out the stable hands and threaten them with bodily harm for not performing their slave labors to his satisfaction. Those

stable hands were human men who had been captured, enslaved and blinded by the giants. Those ungrateful, lazy bastards. But Able put them in their place. He was able to do so because he was bigger and stronger and more Able than they. Might makes right.

hartshorn wrote:

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As I have posted before, a Knight is really better understood as something like white blood cell in a body, fighting off attacks on the nation in a very selfless way and rewarded for this by a complex of rights and honors that (taken alone) seem reasonless.

From the very first day that Able woke up in his big body, he started pushing people around in an entirely selfish way, beginning with Toug's family, at a time when he wasn't even a nominal knight. The ship captain, innkeepers, jailers and almost everyone he crossed paths with who was a knight's *social inferior* he treated like crap, throughout both books.

Otoh, in the presence of those in the social pecking order commonly regarded as a knight's 'betters', he behaved like a boot-licking lackey. That those who were his 'betters' had achieved their positions by force of arms, wealth, marriage or accidents of birth, rather than the merits of fill-in-the-blank ideals, didn't matter. My Lord, may he always be right, but my Lord, right or wrong.

Hence the strong prohibitions and severe tests put in the way of any one who would attempt to gain the honor and rewards of a Knight without earning them.

As I said before, Able *didn't* earn them. He was appointed a knight by the action and whim of his fairy lover.

A Knight's values are not those of an ordinary person: but then reputation and manners are the means by which human beings enforce behavioural standards on each other, and a leucocyte's program of behaviour is not that of an ordinary body cell.

I would make another analogy, that of a knight as an American Old West 'hired gun' or a Mafia goon. Codes of honor are involved there too, but that doesn't make them right or good.

Speaking of those "behavioral standards", it might be useful to those new to this List if you re-posted a link to that Wolfe Tolkien essay you bought a few years ago. The piece might afford some insight into Wolfe's views of social structure in Days of Yore and in TWK, particularly the first two paragraphs.

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 27 Oct 2005, 07:55 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

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Climbing down to Niflheim and fighting the dragons counts as "nothing???"

Able is a knight not a saint

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Here 'tis <http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/wolfemountains.html>

In fact here is the whole thing.

The Best Introduction to the Mountains
by Gene Wolfe

There is one very real sense in which the Dark Ages were the brightest of times, and it is this: that they were times of defined and definite duties and freedoms. The king might rule badly, but everyone agreed as to what good rule was. Not only every earl and baron but every carl and churl knew what an ideal king would say and do. The peasant might behave badly; but the peasant did not expect praise for it, even his own praise. These assertions can be quibbled over endlessly, of course; there are always exceptional persons and exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless they represent a broad truth about Christianized barbarian society as a whole, and arguments that focus on exceptions provide a picture that is fundamentally false, even when the instances on which they are based are real and honestly presented. At a time when few others knew this, and very few others understood its implications, J. R. R. Tolkien both knew and understood, and was able to express that understanding in art, and in time in great art.

That, I believe, was what drew me to him so strongly when I first encountered The Lord of the Rings. As a child I had been taught a code of conduct: I was to be courteous and considerate, and most courteous and most considerate of those less strong than I -- of girls and women, and of old people especially. Less educated men might hold inferior positions, but that did not mean that they themselves were inferior; they might be (and often would be) wiser, braver, and more honest than I was. They were entitled to respect, and were to be thanked when they befriended me, even in minor matters. Legitimate authority was to be obeyed without shirking and without question. Mere strength (the corrupt coercion Washington calls power and Chicago clout) was to be defied. It might be better to be a slave than to die, but it was better to die than to be a slave who acquiesced in his own slavery. Above all, I was to be honest with everyone. Debts were to be paid, and my word was to be as good as I could make it.

With that preparation I entered the Mills of Mordor, where courtesy is weakness, honesty is foolishness, and cruelty is entertainment.

I was living in a club for men, a place much like a YMCA. I was thoroughly wretched in half a dozen ways (much more so than I had ever been in college or the Army), but for the first time in

my life I had enough money to subscribe to magazines and even buy books in hardcover. Planet Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Weird Tales, and Famous Fantastic Mysteries -- pulps I had read as a boy while hiding behind the candy counter in the Richmond Pharmacy -- were gone; but Astounding Stories lingered as a digest-size magazine a bit less costly than most paperback books. There was also The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, put out by the same company that had published Curtains for the Copper and other Mercury Mysteries that my mother and I had devoured. I subscribed to both, and to any other magazines dealing with science fiction or fantasy that could locate.

Here I must do someone (quite likely the late Anthony Boucher) a grave injustice. I no longer recall who wrote the review I read in Fantasy & Science Fiction. It was a glowing review, and I would quote at length from it if I could. It convinced me then and there that I must read The Lord of the Rings. In those days (the middle 1950s, if you can conceive of a period so remote) the magazine offered books for sale -- one might write enclosing a cheque, and receive the book one had ordered by mail. Accustomed as you are to ordering from Amazon.com, you will deride so primitive a system; but you have never been a friendless young man in a strange city far from home. Now that you have enjoyed yourself, please keep in mind that the big-box stores we are accustomed to did not exist. There was no cavernous Barnes & Noble stocking a thousand titles under Science Fiction and Fantasy, no two-tiered Borders rejoicing in a friendly coffee shop and a dozen helpful clerks. There were (if the city was large and one was lucky) one or two old-line book shops downtown; they carried bestsellers, classics like Anna Karenina, cookbooks, and books of local interest, with a smattering of other things, mostly humour and books about dogs. The city in which I was living also boasted a glorious used-book store, five floors and a cellar, in which one might find the most amazing things; but these things did not include science fiction or much fantasy -- the few who were fortunate enough to own those books kept them. There may have been speciality shops already in New York; there very probably were. But if there were, they could not have specialized in fantasy or science fiction. Or in horror, for that matter. It was a surprise, a distinct departure from the usual publishing practices, whenever any such book appeared.

An example may make the reason clear. In 1939, August Derleth and Donald Wandrei had published twelve hundred copies of H. P. Lovecraft's The Outsider and Others, at their own expense. Fanzines had publicized their effort widely and with enthusiasm; but selling those twelve hundred books, which cost three dollars and fifty cents before publication and five dollars after, took four years.

The copy of The Fellowship of the Ring that I received from Fantasy & Science Fiction lies on my desk as I write. It is, I suppose, the first American edition; it was issued in 1956 (the year in which I bought it) by the Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston. It is gold-stamped, and is bound in cloth the colour of slightly faded denim. Its elegant dust jacket vanished long ago, though I still recall it. Its back board holds a much-folded map of Middle-earth, sixteen inches on a side, showing among other places the Shire, the Lost Realm of Arnor, Mirkwood, the Brown Lands, Rohan, and Gondor. On its half-title there is now a quotation from Thoreau that I inscribed in blue ink many years ago. I give it because its presence on that slightly yellowed page should convey to you more of what this book meant to me in those days than anything that I might write in my little essay possibly could.

Our fabled shores none ever reach,
No mariner has found our beach,
Scarcely our mirage is seen,
And Neighbouring waves of floating green,
Yet still the oldest charts contain
Some dotted outline of our main.

You are not likely to believe me when I say that I still remember vividly, almost 50 years later, how strictly I disciplined myself with that book, forcing myself to read no more than a single chapter each evening. The catch, my out, the stratagem by which I escaped the bonds of my own law, was that I could read that chapter as many times as I wished; and that I could also return to the chapter I had read the night before, if I chose. There were evenings on which I reread the entire book up the point -- The Council of Elrond, let us say -- at which I had forced myself to stop.

Naturally I had sent for The Two Towers as soon as I could. Eventually it came, bound and typeset as beautifully as The Fellowship of the Ring, with the same map (I confess that I had hoped for something new) in its back. Just as I inscribed that quotation from Thoreau in Fellowship, I put one from Conrad Aiken on the half-title page of Two Towers:

There was an island in the sea
That out of immortal chaos reared
Towers of topaz, trees of pearl
For maidens adored and warriors feared.

Long ago it sunk in the sea;
And now, a thousand fathoms deep,
Sea worms above it whirl their lamps,
Crabs on the pale mosaic creep.

By the time I received Two Towers, I had learned my lesson -- I ordered The Return of the King at once. That, too, is on my desk. With one other thing, its back holds a delightfully detailed map of Rohan, Gondor, and Mordor. The quotation I inscribed on its half-title is from Robert E. Howard. You have my leave to quarrel with me, but I think it the finest of the three, indeed one of the finest things have ever read.

Into the west, unknown of man,
Ships have sailed since the world began.
Read, if you dare, what Skelos wrote,
With dead hands fumbling his silken coat;
And follow the ships through the wind-blown wrack--
Follow the ships that come not back.

If you remember the end of this last volume, how Frodo rides to the Grey Havens in the long Firth of Lune and boards the white ship, never to be seen again in Middle-earth, you will understand why I chose that particular quotation and why I treasure it (and the book which holds it) even today. But there is one thing more.

You see, ten years later I wrote J. R. R. Tolkien a fan letter. He answered it, and I tipped his answer into the back with the map. The body of his letter is typewritten (I would judge on an electric typewriter) but the footnote is in script. I would like to express my appreciation to Douglas A. Anderson, who is familiar with Tolkien's hand and has very kindly corrected my missreadings of it.

7th November 1966

Dear Mr Wolfe,

Thank you very much for your letter. The etymology of words and names in my story has two sides: (1) their etymology within the story; and (2) the sources from which I, as an author, derive them. I expect you mean the latter. Orc I derived from Anglo-Saxon, a word meaning demon, usually supposed to be derived from the Latin Orcus -- Hell. But I doubt this, though the matter is too involved to set out here. Warg is simple. It is an old word for wolf, which also had the sense of an outlaw or hunted criminal. This is its usual sense in surviving texts.* I adopted the word, which had a good sound for the meaning, as a name for this particular brand of demonic wolf in the story.

Yours sincerely,

J. R. R. Tolkien

*O.E. wearg

O. High German warg--

O. Norse varg-r (also = "wolf", espec. of legendary kind)

Surely I need not tell you that I read and reread these books. I married in November of that wonder-filled 1956; and Rosemary and I read them to each other, most often while driving. A note in *The Return of the King* indicates that my older son Roy and I read them together, reading the final page on April 20, 1967. (Roy was born in 1958.) Eventually I feared that I would read my Houghton Mifflin hardcovers to pieces and bought paperbacks, putting the hardcovers away in the old, glass-fronted bookcase where they will stand again when I have completed this tribute to their author.

Yet in a sense, it is complete now. I have shown you, I hope, what these books have meant to me. If you find echoes of them in my own books and stories (and particularly in *The Wizard Knight*, with which I have struggled for the past year) you will not have discomfited me -- I am proud of them. Terry Brooks has often been disparaged for imitating Tolkien, particularly by those reviewers who find his books inferior to Tolkien's own. I can say only that I wish there were more imitators -- we need them -- and that all imitations of so great an original must necessarily be inferior.

What, then, did Tolkien do? And how did he come to do it? The second question can be more easily answered than the first. He was a philologist (Greek philo-logos, a lover of words), and he had somehow escaped the modern cast of mind that makes us glory in ignorance and regard our forebears, who somehow muddled along without washing machines and air conditioning, with contempt. I have quoted a great deal already. I hope that you will permit me this one, too:

... The stupid, strong

Unteachable monsters are certain to be victorious at last,

And every man of decent blood is on the losing side.

Take as your model...

...Him who as the death spear entered into his vitals

Made critical comments on its workmanship and aim.

Are these the Pagans you spoke of? Know your betters and crouch, dogs;

You that have Vichy-water in your veins and worship the event,

Your goddess History (whom your fathers called the strumpet Fortune).

The author is Tolkien's close friend, C. S. "Jack" Lewis.

It is said with some truth that there is no progress without loss; and it is always said, by those who wish to destroy good things, that progress requires it. No great insight or experience of the world is necessary to see that such people really care nothing for progress. They wish to destroy for their profit, and they, being clever, try to persuade us that progress and change are synonymous.

They are not; and it is not just my own belief but a well-established scientific fact that most change is for the worse: any change increases entropy (unavailable energy). Therefore, any change that produces no net positive good is invariably harmful. Progress, then, does not consist of destroying good things in the mere hope that the things that will replace them will be better (they will not be) but in retaining good things while adding more. Here is a practical illustration. This paper is good and the forest is good as well. If the manufacture of this paper results in the destruction of the forest, the result will be a net loss. That is mere change; we have changed the forest into paper, a change that may benefit some clever men who own a paper mill but hurts the mass of Earth's people. If, on the other hand, we manufacture the paper without destroying the forest (harvesting mature trees and planting new ones) we all benefit. We engineers will tell you that there has been an increase in entropy just the same; but it is an increase that would take place anyway, and so does us no added harm. It is also a much smaller increase than would result from the destruction of the forest.

I have approached this scientifically because Tolkien's own approach was historical, and it is a mark of truth that the same truth can be approached by many roads. Philology led him to the study of the largely illiterate societies of Northern Europe between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the true Middle Ages (roughly AD 400 to 1000). There he found a quality -- let us call it Folk Law -- that has almost disappeared from his world and ours. It is the neighbour-love and settled customary goodness of the Shire. Frodo is "rich" in comparison to Sam, though no dragon would call Frodo rich; Sam is poor in comparison to Frodo, though Sam is far richer than Gollum, who has been devoured by the tyranny and corruption of the One Ring. Frodo does not despise Sam for his poverty, he employs him; and Sam does not detest Frodo for his wealth, but is grateful for the job. Most central of all, the difference in their positions does not prevent their friendship. And in the end, poor Sam rises in the estimation of the Shire because of his association with Frodo, and rich Frodo sacrifices himself for the good of all the Sams.

A different illustration is found among the elves of Lorien, in their love of beauty and their love of nature. They are Sylvan Elves (East Elves) but the rulers they choose to obey are Eldar (West Elves). They choose to be ruled by people better than themselves, in other words, exactly as we choose to be ruled by people worse. Most clearly of all it is shown in their will to preserve the wisdom of the First Age.

Earlier I asked what Tolkien did and how he came to do it; we have reached the point at which the first question can be answered. He uncovered a forgotten wisdom among the barbarian tribes who had proved (against all expectation) strong enough to overpower the glorious civilizations of Greece and Rome; and he had not only uncovered but understood it. He understood that their strength -- the irresistible strength that had smashed the legions -- had been the product of that wisdom, which has now been ebbing away bit by bit for a thousand

years.

Having learned that, he created in Middle-earth a means of displaying it in the clearest and most favourable possible light. Its reintroduction would be small -- just three books among the overwhelming flood of books published every year -- but as large as he could make it; and he was very conscious (no man has been more conscious of it than he) that an entire forest might spring from a handful of seed. What he did, then, was to plant in my consciousness and yours the truth that society need not be as we see it around us.

Sam Rayburn, a politician of vast experience, once said that all legislation is special-interest legislation. Of our nation, and of the 20th century, that is unquestionably true; but it need not be. We have -- but do not need -- a pestilent swarm of exceedingly clever persons who call themselves public servants when everything about them and us proclaims that they are in fact our masters. They make laws (and regulations and judicial decisions that have the force of laws) faster and more assiduously than any factory in the world makes chains; and they lay them on us.

It need not be so. We might have a society in which the laws were few and just, simple, permanent, and familiar to everyone -- a society in which everyone stood shoulder-to-shoulder because everyone lived by the same changeless rules, and everyone knew what those rules were. When we had it, we would also have a society in which the lack of wealth was not reason for resentment but a spur to ambition, and in which wealth was not a cause for self-indulgence but a call to service. We had it once, and some time in this third millennium we shall have it again; and if we forget to thank John Ronald Reuel Tolkien for it when we get it, we will already have begun the slow and not always unpleasant return to Mordor. Freedom, love of neighbour, and personal responsibility are steep slopes; he could not climb them for us -- we must do that ourselves. But he has shown us the road and the reward.

Copyright — Gene Wolfe, 2001

note added by Andy Robertson

This essay was offered by Mr Wolfe to the anthology "Meditations on Middle-Earth", edited by Karen Haber, but was rejected. We published it in INTERZONE magazine in December 2001.

I thought it would bear further distribution, and contacted Mr Wolfe, who allowed me to purchase the right to post it on this site.

If you should wish to contact Mr Wolfe, please use his agent:

Bob Miller — 01 Nov 2005, 03:12 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

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URL: /pipermail/urth-urth.net/attachments/20051031/cac0b9d8/attachment.html

Michael Straight — 22 Nov 2005, 22:26 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

I'm glad to see some discussion and actual argument about Wizard Knight, even if it's taken me a while to get to it.

On 10/27/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

But he was the same knight who, even in middle age after his sojourn in Skai (carousing, drinking and fighting; no finer venue for honing knightly ideals of chivalry and honor), upbraided the stable hands in Utgard for not taking better care of the horses. It takes a lot of damn gall to ride into Utgard

in the middle of the night on a flying unicorn, roust out the stable hands and threaten them with bodily harm for not performing their slave labors to his satisfaction. Those stable hands were human men who had been captured, enslaved and blinded by the giants. Those ungrateful, lazy bastards. But Able put them in their place. He was able to do so because he was bigger and stronger and more Able than they. Might makes right.

I disagree. Able's might doesn't make him right or wrong. It gives him the power to enforce what he thinks is right, but if he's wrong, then he's wrong no matter how strong he is. And in this case, I think he is right, at least in his judgment, if not in the severity of his actions.

It's sad that the stable hands are slaves and blind, but does that mean they are no longer moral agents, no longer capable of being right or wrong? Were they not wrong to neglect the animals?

Sure, I would probably have behaved as bad or worse in their place and complained that my behavior should be excused because of all I had suffered (I do that now, with much less justification than they). But I would be wrong, and deserve a reprimand at least, if not the beating Able gave them.

-- Rostrum

Roy C. Lackey — 23 Nov 2005, 08:04 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum quoted and wrote:

On 10/27/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

But he was the same knight who, even in middle age after his sojourn in Skai

(carousing, drinking and fighting; no finer venue for honing knightly ideals

of chivalry and honor), upbraided the stable hands in Utgard for not taking

better care of the horses. It takes a lot of damn gall to ride into Utgard

in the middle of the night on a flying unicorn, roust out the stable hands

and threaten them with bodily harm for not performing their slave labors to

his satisfaction. Those stable hands were human men who had been captured,

enslaved and blinded by the giants. Those ungrateful, lazy bastards. But Able put them in their place. He was able to do so because he was bigger and

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I disagree. Able's might doesn't make him right or wrong. It gives him the power to enforce what he thinks is right, but if he's wrong, then he's wrong no matter how strong he is. And in this case, I think he is right, at least in his judgment, if not in the severity of his actions.

Ah, but that flies in the face of the very basis of the concept of "trial by combat" in all its variations. From Lancelot's defense of Guinevere to all those childish, petulant, indefensible defenses against all comers of that mountain pass by Able in TWK, the underlying assumption is that might does, in fact, make right.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

"As it existed in the medieval laws of western Europe, it was typically explained as a *judicium Dei*, the judgment of God. In theory, the trial so conducted would yield a just result because God would strengthen the arm of the combatant who was in the right."

It's sad that the stable hands are slaves and blind, but does that mean they are no longer moral agents, no longer capable of being right or wrong? Were they not wrong to neglect the animals?

Look at the second paragraph of that Tolkien essay again. Like Wolfe, I grew up in Texas in a time when the code of conduct espoused there was nothing exceptional; it was the norm. It's part of the reason I detest Able. Substitute stables and brown-eyed horses with lavatories and dirty toilet bowls and the issue of moral accountability falls away. Sure, horses need food and water to survive, but no one has a **right** to force another to do it. Someone thought the pyramids of Egypt should be built, but the slaves who did the work acquiesced only because they had no choice. I prefer a clean toilet, too, but I don't have the **right** to force my wife to clean it just because I'm bigger than she is. In fact, it is precisely **because** I am bigger and stronger than she that I **may not** force her to do it. I suspect that Wolfe would feel the same way, and I can't imagine Silk treating other people, particularly those less able than he, the way that Able consistently treated those whose social position ranked below a knight's.

It's difficult to reconcile Wolfe's statements about personal conduct in that essay with his apparent endorsement of a stratified society in the same essay. That Able is often portrayed as a lout in TWK is no accident. That he is supposed to be a Hero, also, is no accident. It just doesn't work for me.

-Roy

transient — 23 Nov 2005, 16:06 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Hi! Just some thoughts...

Ah, but that flies in the face of the very basis of the concept of "trial by combat" in all its variations. From Lancelot's defense of Guinevere to all those childish, petulant, indefensible defenses against all comers of that mountain pass by Able in TWK, the underlying assumption is that might does, in fact, make right.

I felt like the upbraiding of the stablehands was a "Severian moment."

In general, I think Wolfe's idea of a True Hero as expressed by Able is of one who does, in fact, use might to make right.

Look at the second paragraph of that Tolkien essay again. Like Wolfe, I grew up in Texas in a time when the code of conduct espoused there was nothing exceptional; it was the norm. It's part of the reason I detest Able. Substitute stables and brown-eyed horses with lavatories and dirty toilet bowls and the issue of moral accountability falls away. Sure, horses need food and water to survive, but no one has a **right** to force another to do it. Someone thought the pyramids of Egypt should be built, but the

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suspect
that Wolfe would feel the same way, and I can't imagine Silk
treating other
people, particularly those less able than he, the way that Able
consistently
treated those whose social position ranked below a knight's.

I will need to track down this essay and read it. But in general, I think there is a big difference between the horses and toilets; in this case the horses are living creatures which need to be defended. In truth, they are also symbols of nobility/gentility and the class of people who would always be above the blind slaves. By firmly reprimanding the stablehands Able is defending both the hapless beasts and the extended feudal society he is a part of.

I definately agree that TWK contains a defence of, or apology for, european feudalism. The idea is certainly that might is the only thing that can make right...while there is no guarantee, as Arnthor demonstrates, of a benevolent leadership under such a system. In TWK, participation in the feudal society is the only avenue towards really being a human that is available - the other routes we have been shown are the clearly stated inhumanness of the Ousterlings or the life in darkness of the slaves of the giants.

The job of stablehand was forced on the slaves in Utgard, but had they lived down south, and had that been their station, it would have been a good job to have. I have a hard time seeing Able as being cruel for lambasting the slaves for their poor performance of their duties; it was like a "get ahold of yourselves, you are still men," kind of slap to the face - a firm reminder that they were sliding away from their humanity by their own choice. He is a redeemer of sorts in this respect: he gives the slaves an opportunity to regain their humanity by doing a human job to the requirements of a human lord.

Having said all of that, you are certainly entitled to detest Able, though I think he is a sight nicer than Severian and more of a man of action, as required by his time and place, than Silk. I think that Able is a really good depiction of the kind of man who brought western civilization from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance. I don't think it a good or easy fight, and if we'd had a lot more men like Able maybe we'd be having this dicussion via email in the 1400's or so.

-Cliff

Andy Robertson — 23 Nov 2005, 17:15 · in reply to transient

transient writes:

I will need to track down this essay and read it.

<http://home.clara.net/andywrobertson/wolfemountains.html>

I think that
Able is a really good depiction of the kind of man who brought

western civilization from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance. I don't think it a good or easy fight, and if we'd had a lot more men like Able maybe we'd be having this discussion via email in the 1400's or so.

-Cliff

Yup.

Chris — 23 Nov 2005, 19:48 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

I disagree. Able's might doesn't make him right or wrong. It gives him the power to enforce what he thinks is right, but if he's wrong, then he's wrong no matter how strong he is. And in this case, I think he is right, at least in his judgment, if not in the severity of his actions.

Ah, but that flies in the face of the very basis of the concept of "trial by combat" in all its variations. From Lancelot's defense of Guinevere to all those childish, petulant, indefensible defenses against all comers of that mountain pass by Able in TWK, the underlying assumption is that might does, in fact, make right.

I would also add that this does not seem to be an unconditional rule, there seem to be explicit and deliberate conditions based on social status. This is another aspect of the general observation that has already been made about the oddness of the behavior of certain characters that seems to be related to their expected social role (see: Idnn, etc.)

In Able's case, this seems to dictate that when people present him with an opposing attitude, some (those of high birth or station) are to be reasoned with and others are to be met with force. If I'm reading it correctly, this isn't quite the simple "might makes right" of the schoolyard bully (though it may well be related). There are times when it might be easier to cajole a churl into compliance rather than forcing them (and thereby gaining their enmity); but to do so would mean not being regarded as a knight, because knights are by definition above this and *demand* loyalty and obedience without question. Able's treatment of those in a lower station is, I think, meant to be problematic: Able could be a better *person* by being a worse *knight*.

I say this not because it makes Able any more appealing of a character, but because I think it makes deeper sense of Able's modes of interaction with various characters.

It's sad that the stable hands are slaves and blind, but does that mean they are no longer moral agents, no longer capable of being right or wrong? Were they not wrong to neglect the animals?

They were certainly wrong to neglect the animals. The fact that they were mistreated - and that they were *forced* against their own will into a situation where the animals were helplessly dependent on them - does not negate the fact that those animals *did* need caring for and they *could* have done so if they had chosen to. This isn't that uncommon of a vice: people who are treated badly have a tendency to treat others badly in turn. This is a chain of abuse that eats away at the character of each person on down the line. (Now this is starting to sound like an essay on my place of employment).

Able wanted the animals to be treated better, which is good. Able may have even wanted the

stable hands to be better people, people who aren't so desensitized that they don't care about the suffering of those under their care - and this too would be good. But Able's adherence to his social role is locked in; he certainly isn't going to come in and beg the stablehands, or bribe them, or give them a moral speech, as we might be inclined to. His way of dealing with the situation is what we consider to be bad.

What gives one pause for thought is that his way of dealing with the situation may in fact have been effective in a situation in which a more modern way of doing things would not. It seems unlikely that the stablehands would have responded to fine words and sentiments.

Look at the second paragraph of that Tolkien essay again. Like Wolfe, I grew up in Texas in a time when the code of conduct espoused there was nothing exceptional; it was the norm. It's part of the reason I detest Able. Substitute stables and brown-eyed horses with lavatories and dirty toilet bowls and the issue of moral accountability falls away.

Moral accountability is precisely what you shouldn't remove here; Able did not come in and upbraid the floor-sweeping or toilet-cleaning slaves. The stablehands did not merely fail to clean toilet bowls, and the treatment of the horses was not at that point a hypothetical question. The animals *were* mistreated, and in bad shape.

Sure, horses need food and water to survive, but no one has a *right* to force another to do it.

I'm not entirely sure how to interpret this. I agree that they shouldn't have been placed in that situation. On the other hand choosing to let the animals suffer rather than taking care of them is inhumane, and I think that even a modern society would judge and/or punish them for that.

Roy C. Lackey — 24 Nov 2005, 08:05 · follows Chris

I wrote:
That Able is often portrayed as a lout in TWK is no accident. That he is supposed to be a Hero, also, is no accident. It just doesn't work for me.<<

People seem to be too hung up on the poor horses. That wasn't my point. Let's forget the horses and take another example of Able's unconscionable behavior, one that Wolfe spent far more time on.

From the moment that Able set foot on the *Western Trader*, he started pushing people around and generally behaving in an extremely obnoxious manner. He barged into the captain's cabin, making unreasonable demands and dictating terms. When the captain objected and ordered him off the ship, Able resorted to brute force. He and Pouk defeated the captain and mate and appropriated the cabin. Able had no right, even had he been a knight, to do what he did. He undermined the legitimate authority of the ship's half-owner captain. He did what he did because he wanted to and was brute enough to get away with it. He was a bully and a thug.

After the ship sailed, it was attacked. He acquitted himself well against the attackers (self-preservation is a great motivator) and was wounded. The captain took back command of his ship. When Able was well enough he, along with his magic hound, attempted to take control of the ship again by intimidating the captain. When the captain dared to resist, he was killed and his body thrown overboard. Able cleaned up the crime scene and appointed the mate as the new captain, thus ensuring the new captain's future cooperation. Able had no authority to do any such thing. His treatment of the captain was entirely self-serving, criminal, unknightly and dishonorable.

Surely a man deserves at least as much consideration as a horse. Would anyone care to defend Able's treatment of the captain?

-Roy

Chris — 24 Nov 2005, 09:47 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy said:

Would anyone care to defend Able's treatment of the captain?

Is that what I was up to there, defending Able? If so I will have to step back and re-evaluate, because I didn't think I was defending anyone (including Able) from anything aside from questionable analogies.

transient — 24 Nov 2005, 16:44 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Nov 24 2005, at 3:05 AM, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

After the ship sailed, it was attacked. He acquitted himself well against the attackers (self-preservation is a great motivator) and was wounded. The captain took back command of his ship. When Able was well enough he, along with his magic hound, attempted to take control of the ship again by intimidating the captain. When the captain dared to resist, he was killed and his body thrown overboard. Able cleaned up the crime scene and appointed the mate as the new captain, thus ensuring the new captain's future cooperation. Able had no authority to do any such thing. His treatment of the captain was entirely self-serving, criminal, unknightly and dishonorable.

Surely a man deserves at least as much consideration as a horse. Would anyone care to defend Able's treatment of the captain?

-Roy

True, he essentially murdered the captain and stole his boat. Someone could probably argue that the line was still blurry there, that the captain could have gotten out of it with his life and his ship, or that the environment Able stepped into when he first set foot onboard the _Western Trader_ was suitably cutthroat that if he had not taken such measures to demand respect immediately, he would have been taken advantage of and possibly killed himself. I don't think so myself, but i do think the idea is that Able's aspirations towards Knighthood would have never gotten started if he hadn't conducted himself in such a manner. If you despise this idea you are well entitled to.

What I think is the main thing is that Able was not yet a knight at all - this was early in his development and he still had lots to learn. I find that to be an interesting take on the heroic paradigm. Instead of a hero who grows in power and wisdom while having an unshakable moral center from inception to apotheosis, which I think of as fairly typical in fantasy (anybody reading David Zindell's books? Danlo / Valashu comes to mind), Able has no moral center at the beginning of the story, or through most of the first book. I think when you are assessing Able's

character you really have to take into account whether you are looking at him pre- or post-Skai.

He also kind of reminds of Cu Chullain, who was a nasty individual who did great things for small reasons.

Michael Straight — 24 Nov 2005, 21:35 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 11/23/05, Roy C. Lackey <rlackey at stic.net> wrote:

I disagree. Able's might doesn't make him right or wrong. It gives him the power to enforce what he thinks is right, but if he's wrong, then he's wrong no matter how strong he is.

Ah, but that flies in the face of the very basis of the concept of "trial by combat" in all its variations. From Lancelot's defense of Guinevere to all those childish, petulant, indefensible defenses against all comers of that mountain pass by Able in TWK, the underlying assumption is that might does, in fact, make right.

I don't think Able thinks, at this point in the story, that being strong makes any opinion he has automatically right. I think he believes he is morally right and therefore has the right/obligation to use his strength to enforce what he thinks is right.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:

"As it existed in the medieval laws of western Europe, it was typically explained as a *judicium Dei*, the judgment of God. In theory, the trial so conducted would yield a just result because God would strengthen the arm of the combatant who was in the right."

So Able lives in a society where it is assumed that someone who is morally right will be vindicated in battle.

We, the readers, may disagree. We may believe that sometimes those who are morally right lose the battle.

But I don't see what that has to do with how we judge Able's actions. In the case of standing up for the horses, I think he was right. In the case of murdering the captain and stealing his ship, I think he was wrong. In neither case is my opinion based on whether he had the strength to enforce his vision of right and wrong.

I prefer a clean toilet, too, but I don't have the **right** to force my wife to clean it just because I'm bigger than she is. In fact, it is precisely **because** I am bigger and stronger than she that I **may not** force her to do it.

If you were divorced and your wife were neglecting your children, you would have the right and the duty to force her to take care of the children (or relinquish custody of them), regardless of which of you is bigger or stronger.

Because of the way our society is structured, "force" would mean lawsuits, to begin with. But it would also mean the threat of guns, violence, and prison if she were to ignore the lawsuits.

In Able's society, he didn't have lawsuits. As a knight, he had the duty to enforce the law, in this case making sure that those who had the legal obligation to care for the horses did so.

Michael Straight — 24 Nov 2005, 22:02 · in reply to transient

On 11/23/05, transient <transient at gmail.com> wrote

I definately agree that TWK contains a defence of, or apology for, european feudalism.

I think this is an oversimplification that lies at the heart of my disagreement with many of those who dislike the Wizard Knight (and also the guy linked to earlier who think Wolfe is fetishizing torture in Urth).

Wolfe presents us with a different society, a society that has morals and values that differ from ours. And I think we are encouraged to see that there are some things about this society that are admirable, and some which are not. I do think there are times where Wolfe wants the reader to question his own values, to reconsider whether this or that aspect of Mythgarthr that we might initially reject as bad might not have some worth after all, but I wouldn't equate that as an apology for european feudalism

Within this framework, we have Able. Sometimes he is "good" by the values of his society, sometimes he is "good" by the values of ours. Sometimes he is both and sometimes he is neither.

I most disagree with the idea that we are supposed to wholly approve of or wholly disapprove of Able and his society and his behavior. What a boring book that would be.

And I don't think that Wolfe giving Severian a cool outfit means he's trying to trick us into approving of torture. Just the opposite. Sometimes, in real life, the bad guys have the coolest outfits. And it's an important skill to be able to say, yes, the outfits look good, but the actions of the people wearing them are still evil.

Michael Straight — 24 Nov 2005, 22:33 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 11/24/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
Would
anyone care to defend Able's treatment of the captain?

In the first part of the first book, there is a lot of stuff Able does that I think is morally wrong and do not defend. But I think much of it makes sense for the character, and I so I don't see these episodes as a failing of the book.

1. The way Able treats Touk and his family right after he gets embiggened. He acts here in ways that our society would consider bullying. From Able's point of view this is at most a day or two after he was there with Ravd, who was pretty harsh in interrogating the villagers. So it's quite possible he's trying to act like he thought Ravd was acting. Also, he's what, 14 years old? I have no trouble believing a 14-yr-old who was suddenly as strong as Able would behave like a jerk and a bully, especially at first.

2. Able's treatment of the captain. Able is a 14(?) yr old boy and a modern American. Living with the poor in the countryside would be pretty rough for a kid like that - dirty, uncomfortable, etc. But the conditions on a sailing ship would be far worse. The captain's cabin was probably the only place on the ship that seemed at all habitable to Able.

That doesn't excuse the way he started making unreasonable demands. But again, I think at this point he's trying to get people to accept him as a knight by acting like one -- except at this point his main idea of a knight is a big strong guy who lords it over peasants. And I think things escalated out of Able's control, to the point where he thought he had to kill the Captain or be killed. I think he was wrong, that he should have found a different way to resolve the situation. But I thought the characterization made sense and made for interesting reading.

Chris — 25 Nov 2005, 00:33 · in reply to Michael Straight

Might as well refer back to the chapter in question. On p. 127 of the trade, Able asks after his possessions after he's regained consciousness:

Pouk coughed. "Speakin' of Cap'n... As we was, sir, 'cause he's prob'ly got 'em. Speakin' o' him, I've learnt what he's plannin', sir. He told Mate, an' Mate told Second, and Njors heard him an' told me. When we get to port, sir, he'll pay off the crew and let 'em go ashore. He thinks everybody'll go, only I won't, sir. Him an' Mate'll come down here to do for you then, only I'll be with you."

[Note that the reason he's talking about the captain getting the crew out of the way is that the captain wanted to kill him while he was unconscious, and the crew wouldn't let him.]

On p. 128-9 of the trade the actual confrontation plays out. Able is sitting, on account of his wound.

"I want my bow and I want my money. Somebody told me you had them, but he was too scared of you to come in here and get them for me. So I'm here to get them myself. You've got the sword, which is yours, and you'll have some money of your own. Go get it, and give me mine. All I want is what belongs to me. Give it to me, with my bow, the case, and my quiver, and you can go away without fighting."

He shook his head.

"I didn't think you would. All right, here's my last offer. Gylf and I will go out on deck. Before the next watch, you clear out of this cabin, leaving all my stuff - money, bowcase, armor, and so forth - where I can find it. Twenty-two gold ceptres, most of them new and all real gold, plus my other stuff. Will you do that?"

He stood up and Gylf growled. I was afraid he was going to grow into the black thing that had killed the outlaws, and I told him not to.

"You'll return my ship and its cargo to me when we reach port?"

"Sure," I said. "But I don't want them in the first place. I don't--"

He was grabbing his sword...

Mind you, the situation with the ship and his way of dealing with the captain was bad from the very beginning. And you can certainly say that it was this handling of things from the outset that created this mess. But the way Roy portrayed the killing of the captain is clearly off the mark, and his interpretation colored by his dislike for Able. The captain, at this point, had determined to murder Able regardless; in this confrontation he decided to take a chance that Able's wound, the fact that he was seated, and the element of surprise would give him just enough advantage to kill Able, and he almost succeeded.

The key points at which to criticize and/or examine Able are:

- * His treatment of the captain (and others) from the very moment he set foot on the ship.
- * His decision to dispose of the body, which was self-serving and untruthful in a way that is difficult to explain. To wit, why does he feel the need to get rid of the body when everyone on the ship will surely know what has happened in general, if not in exact detail?

What does not help is to portray the captain as the innocent victim of a cold-blooded assassination.

On 11/24/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

Would anyone care to defend Able's treatment of the captain?

In the first part of the first book, there is a lot of stuff Able does that I think is morally wrong and do not defend. But I think much of it makes sense for the character, and I so I don't see these episodes as a failing of the book.

1. The way Able treats Touk and his family right after he gets embiggened. He acts here in ways that our society would consider bullying. From Able's point of view this is at most a day or two after he was there with Ravd, who was pretty harsh in interrogating the villagers. So it's quite possible he's trying to act like he thought Ravd was acting. Also, he's what, 14 years old? I have no trouble believing a 14-yr-old who was suddenly as strong as Able would behave like a jerk and a bully, especially at first.

2. Able's treatment of the captain. Able is a 14(?) yr old boy and a modern American. Living with the poor in the countryside would be pretty rough for a kid like that - dirty, uncomfortable, etc. But the conditions on a sailing ship would be far worse. The captain's cabin was probably the only place on the ship that seemed at all habitable to Able.

That doesn't excuse the way he started making unreasonable demands. But again, I think at this point he's trying to get people to accept him as a knight by acting like one -- except at this point his main idea of a knight is a big strong guy who lords it over peasants. And I think things escalated out of Able's control, to the point where he thought he had to kill the Captain or be killed. I think he was wrong, that he should have found a different way to resolve the situation. But I thought the characterization made sense and made for interesting reading.

transient — 25 Nov 2005, 01:36 · in reply to Michael Straight

On Nov 24 2005, at 5:02 PM, Michael Straight wrote:

On 11/23/05, transient <transient at gmail.com> wrote

I definately agree that TWK contains a defence of, or apology for, european feudalism.

I think this is an oversimplification that lies at the heart of my disagreement with many of those who dislike the Wizard Knight (and also the guy linked to earlier who think Wolfe is fetishizing torture in Urth).

Wolfe presents us with a different society, a society that has morals and values that differ from ours. And I think we are encouraged to see that there are some things about this society that are admirable, and some which are not. I do think there are times where Wolfe wants the reader to question his own values, to reconsider whether this or

that aspect of Mythgarthr that we might initially reject as bad might not have some worth after all, but I wouldn't equate that as an apology for european feudalism

Within this framework, we have Able. Sometimes he is "good" by the values of his society, sometimes he is "good" by the values of ours. Sometimes he is both and sometimes he is neither. evil.

It isn't just a "different society," though, it is very definately a pre-medieval western european society. I am not saying that is _all_ it is by any means; Wolfe definately gets into some serious proto- mythology and uses it to examine itself and other such fascinating puzzles. But if you ignore the definate references to Christianized germanic, celtic, and norse culture, I think you are missing the main thrust of the book.

And I don't think that Wolfe giving Severian a cool outfit means he's trying to trick us into approving of torture. Just the opposite. Sometimes, in real life, the bad guys have the coolest outfits. And it's an important skill to be able to say, yes, the outfits look good, but the actions of the people wearing them are still

I think it is interesting that you bring up Severian, because if you compare Able to Severian he really is pretty saintly. Horn, too.

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 25 Nov 2005, 03:24 · follows transient

On Thu, 24 Nov 2005 14:33:58 -0800 Michael Straight
<mfstraight at gmail.com> wrote:

That doesn't excuse the way he started making unreasonable demands.

But again, I think at this point he's trying to get people to accept him as a knight by acting like one -- except at this point his main idea of a knight is a big strong guy who lords it over peasants.

And

I think things escalated out of Able's control, to the point where

he

thought he had to kill the Captain or be killed. I think he was wrong, that he should have found a different way to resolve the situation. But I thought the characterization made sense and made

for

interesting reading.

I think it has to be remembered that Art's absolute goal is to get Disiri. To do that, he (thinks he) needs to get honor & recognition. Becoming a knight is the only way he can see of doing this, and the only way of becoming a knight is to actually be one.

In this society, the knightly virtues are entirely military. We are not in a 14th century chanson; we are in the world of Roland or, of course, Norse epic - or really, any of the societies throughout history where military virtues have dominated. It could be ancient Greece or Rome, where the doctrine that "the strong take from the weak" was generally seen as right and just. It could be the real medieval Europe.

In such a society, place depends on strength, and to gain or retain place, you must retaliate

immediately against slight by those beneath you.

A slight includes failure to pay deference. Those beneath you include anybody who isn't either a noble or a warrior. A merchant captain is on the same base level as a peasant. If these people do not pay deference to you, you're not a knight. Art's treatment of Toug's family, the ship captain, the others are all absolutely consistent with the society and Art's aspirations within it.

I think Wolfe does this exceptionally well. Of course, he intends a critique of these kinds of society. They promote courage and a certain kind of loyalty, which are good things, but not enough.

One missing component is the downwards-obligation, the miles as protector of the weak, rather than persecutor. Theoretically, this was the modification to the warrior-ethic introduced by churchmen in medieval times - the idealized conception of "kighthood", which of course bore little resemblance to reality.

By the end of the story, Art has indeed introduced such a notion: witness his pathetic programmed plea to Arnthor from the Aelf. The rulers of the kingdom stand accused of not attending to their downwards obligations, to both the Aelf and their own "base" citizenry.

By implication, the accusation extends upwards, to the Overcyn. In the end, Art is an Overcyn, and he goes against the apparent wishes of the Valfather to actually use his powers for the benefit of humans. Nowhere else (I think) is there any suggestion that the Overcyn have done this in the past.

I am sure we are supposed to see Art's action as signalling a new order of things in which the downwards obligations are recognized, blessed by the true God.

And as always with Wolfe, the *really* important thing is Love. Combined with even crude Courage, even crude Love will transcend its base roots. What saves Art from being *just* an overgrown lout is his love for Disiri. The great mystery of Wolfe's universes is this love of the higher for the lower - SilkHorn's love for shabby Oreb, Art's for stick-figure Disiri, by implication God's for us.

The downwards-obligation necessary for a just social order is just one aspect of this. Without it, with Courage alone, we are in the world of the Wizard Knight.

As to whether Wolfe himself thinks that this warrior-ethic-plus- obligations is an ideal political & social ethos: IMO, probably. He sure isn't a fan of democratic capitalism, for example. Personally, I think it sucks, to the extent I can take it seriously. But so what? I think Wolfe does extraordinarily well in telling the story, and his warrior-ethos world is for me exquisitely real, in the important things.

Andy Robertson — 25 Nov 2005, 08:02 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

By implication, the accusation extends upwards, to the Overcyn. In the end, Art is an Overcyn, and he goes against the apparent wishes of the Valfather to actually use his powers for the benefit of humans. Nowhere else (I think) is there any suggestion that the Overcyn have done this in the past.

This is a good post, and you diagram Art's development well, but you are wrong if you think the pattern of pagan society did not include obligation down as well as up. The feudal oath is about this obligation, and pagan pre-christian society depended on it. As Art rises to Knight he gets plenty of education in these values from his seniors.

OTOH Art (as a low-status man trying to fight his way up) certainly shows little of these values to start with.

The Overcyn are an ideal pattern for humanity - among other things - and are also the fathers and guides of humanity. They don't waste their powers on trivial things because they are not omnipotent - far from it, they are busy fighting Jotuns who are much more powerful than them - and their real hope is to raise up new warriors from men to the status of Overcyn in order to aid them.

Valhalla isn't a lollipop reward for virtue: Mythgarthr is a proto-Overcyn training camp. That's why they don't "use their powers to aid humanity."

hartshorn

Michael Straight — 25 Nov 2005, 23:56 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 11/23/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

Ah, but that flies in the face of the very basis of the concept of "trial by combat" in all its variations. From Lancelot's defense of Guinevere to all those childish, petulant, indefensible defenses against all comers of that mountain pass by Able in TWK, the underlying assumption is that might does, in fact, make right.

There is this one case where we see what I might call "might makes right" where Able goes to defend the pass and challenge all comers.

Able plans to guard a pass and challenge any knight who seeks to cross, the winner keeping the loser's armor, horse, and weapons. In this sense, right makes might because a man who could challenge a knight this way and defeat him was a better fighter, more fit to wear the armor and carry the weapons. And in that society, the primary value of a knight is that he be skilled in combat.

So in that narrow sense, the mightier man has the right to the armor and weapons of the other. But only because a knight's armor and weapons are not simply his personal property, but property he wields on behalf of the whole society. And if another man can better defend society with them, he must relinquish them to that other man.

My impression is that Able's plan is seen in Mythgarthian society as something like a violin player in an orchestra challenging the first-chair for his seat. He is seeking to deprive the musician of his place and livelihood (and possibly his instrument -- in some orchestras the first chair gets to play a rare masterpiece owned by the orchestra or its patrons). But the musician's plight takes a back seat to the need for the orchestra to have the best possible musicians. In the orchestra, "skill makes right."

-- Rostrum

Michael Straight — 26 Nov 2005, 00:00 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

On 11/24/05, thalassocrat at nym.hush.com <thalassocrat at nym.hush.com> wrote:

As to whether Wolfe himself thinks that this warrior-ethic-plus-obligations is an ideal political & social ethos: IMO, probably. He sure isn't a fan of democratic capitalism, for example. Personally, I think it sucks, to the extent I can take it seriously. But so

what? I think Wolfe does extraordinarily well in telling the story, and his warrior-ethos world is for me exquisitely real, in the important things.

Again with the black/white, either/or. Boring!

I think Wolfe finds some things about the warrior-ethic-plus-obligations admirable. I imagine there are in democratic capitalism things that he would acknowledge as good. Is there nothing at all in the society Wolfe depicts that you find attractive?

Roy C. Lackey — 26 Nov 2005, 08:46 · follows Michael Straight

Chris wrote:

Might as well refer back to the chapter in question. On p. 127 of the trade,
Able asks after his possessions after he's regained consciousness:

Pouk coughed. "Speakin' of Cap'n... As we was, sir, 'cause he's prob'ly got 'em. Speakin' o' him, I've learnt what he's plannin', sir. He told Mate, an' Mate told Second, and Njors heard him an' told me. When we get to port, sir, he'll pay off the crew and let 'em go ashore. He thinks everybody'll go, only I won't, sir. Him an' Mate'll come down here to do for you then, only I'll be with you."

The text immediately continues:

"I said no. 'I won't wait for them. How long before we get to port?'"

[Note that the reason he's talking about the captain getting the crew out of the way is that the captain wanted to kill him while he was unconscious, and the crew wouldn't let him.]

Note that Able said that he wouldn't wait because he was determined to implement the more common perversion of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others before they do unto you."

On p. 128-9 of the trade the actual confrontation plays out. Able is sitting, on account of his wound.

The pagination of the trade seems to correspond with the hardback.

Just before the section of text Chris quoted below is this:

"I told Gylf to let him [the captain] see him then, and he did. He had been lying in a corner where it was dark and he came up out of there like brown smoke but all solid and snarling. "'I can kill you if I want to,' I told the captain. 'I beat you before, and I can beat you again. Gylf could kill you, too, and you won't stand the ghost of a chance against both of us.'"

The captain had barred the door behind himself when he entered the cabin. He was alone with Able and Gylf. Able knew that the captain would not accept the terms he then offered --he said so -- which were the same terms that he had dictated before; the captain must knuckle under and leave Able in the captain's cabin. He also had no doubts about the winner of a fight against the captain. He said so. Both versions of the terms he demanded amounted to the same thing.

"I want my bow and I want my money. Somebody told me you had them, but he was too scared of you to come in here and get them for me. So I'm here to get them myself. You've got the sword, which is yours, and you'll have some money of your own. Go get it, and give me mine. All I want is what belongs

to me. Give it to me, with my bow, the case, and my quiver, and you can go away without fighting."

He shook his head.

"I didn't think you would. All right, here's my last offer. Gylf and I will go out on deck. Before the next watch, you clear out of this cabin, leaving all my stuff - money, bowcase, armor, and so forth - where I can find it. Twenty-two gold ceptres, most of them new and all real gold, plus my other stuff. Will you do that?"

He stood up and Gylf growled. I was afraid he was going to grow into the black thing that had killed the outlaws, and I told him not to.

BTW, Able didn't want Gylf to turn into that big "black thing" because *he* was afraid of it. It wasn't out of concern for the captain or any sense of fair play.

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He was grabbing his sword...

Mind you, the situation with the ship and his way of dealing with the captain was bad from the very beginning. And you can certainly say that it was this handling of things from the outset that created this mess. But the way Roy portrayed the killing of the captain is clearly off the mark, and his interpretation colored by his dislike for Able. The captain, at this point, had determined to murder Able regardless; in this confrontation he decided to take a chance that Able's wound, the fact that he was seated, and the element of surprise would give him just enough advantage to kill Able, and he almost succeeded.

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- * His decision to dispose of the body, which was self-serving and untruthful in a way that is difficult to explain. To wit, why does he feel the need to get rid of the body when everyone on the ship will surely know what has happened in general, if not in exact detail?

What does not help is to portray the captain as the innocent victim of a cold-blooded assassination.

The captain may not have had a reserved seat in the church choir, but he was definitely a victim of naked, unprovoked aggression on the occasion of his first encounter with Able. It was Able who initiated physical hostilities in that first meeting, after the captain ordered him off his ship. If you want to say that the captain's display of a sword to punctuate his order made Able feel threatened and therefore justified in using force to gain the advantage, then you must grant the captain the same consideration in the second encounter. That's what Able was doing when he called up Gylf; punctuating his demands with a show of force.

The captain had two choices -- submit or fight. He had been forced to submit, on pain of death,

the first time. He was within his rights, as ship's captain, to execute Able for his crimes -- and Able's actions *were* criminal -- after fate allowed him to regain command of his ship. He was within his rights, as a man, to retaliate against the man who had harmed him. What the captain may have been guilty of is failing to recognize the hopelessness of his position in the second altercation. Or maybe he did recognize it but chose to fight anyway. After all, he had already lost face and authority as captain, so much so that the crew felt emboldened to threaten mutiny when he wanted to kill Able. To lose his authority a second time would have ruined him.

It may not have been a "cold-blooded assassination", but Able knew the likely outcome when he took over the captain's cabin the second time. We've all seen this scene played out a hundred times in old Westerns: The gunslinger comes into town, picks a fight with a local -- knowing full well that the local doesn't stand a chance against him -- and kills him. As the gun smoke clears, he tells the sheriff, "It was a fair fight. Ask anybody. They all saw it. He even drew first. It was self-defense."

That's one way to look at it. Call it whatever you like, but the captain's death is on Able's hands, if not his conscience. And if I were St. Peter, keepin' score, he ain't gettin' into Heaven. <g>

-Roy

James Wynn — 27 Nov 2005, 04:55 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

The captain may not have had a reserved seat in the church choir, but he was definitely a victim of naked, unprovoked aggression on the occasion of his first encounter with Able.

Yes. But something very significant has happened since then. If Arthur Ormsby's account is to be believed, then he--by his initiative and actions-- saved the entire ship, its crew, *and* the captain. Had the captain had his way, Able would not have been on that ship and it would have been lost and the captain would have been toast (not merely a metaphor considering that he would have been someone's breakfast). There is simply no getting around the very objective determination that the captain *owed* Able his ship and his life. While Able had done nothing to prove that he deserved the captain's cabin when he came on the ship, he definitely had earned it by the time the captain attempted to kill him AND ROB HIM.

To assert, "Well, Able saved his own life too" would have been reprehensible ingratitude by anyone actually on that ship.

Able didn't murder the captain either. It was self-defense and Able did everything he could to warn the captain off such an engagement. The captain attempted to sucker-hit Able and the result was a fight that ended in the captain's death.

Able is a complex character, but the captain is not. His treatment of Able after the sea battle was villainish and everyone on the ship recognized it as such.

As for Able's treatment of the livery hands, I don't see any possibility for reconciliation on this question. Some see a parent using corporal punishment on their child as "bullying" and others see invaluable instruction. There's no way one side is going to convince the other, but is it seems probability on which side Wolfe would fall.

As for the "might makes right" rule, didn't TH White already argue on the logic for "trial by arms" in "The Once and Future King"? King Arthur says (paraphrasing) "How else should we settle such disputes? By arguing the facts? Then whoever is the better debater will always win. How is that fair?"

Of course, we see this in our modern "civilized" judiciary all the time. Those who can afford the best arguers can get away with practically anything.

Part of the problem with the story, is that Wolfe has presented a world in which it is not self-evident that the Overcyns intervene in trials by arms, and people don't seem to expect them too. This muddles the primary purpose of the practice I think. Ancient people seemed to believe that God (or the gods) expressed their judgment through trial by arms...that God gives strength to the Right and that the along with their physical strength, God has given them to strength of character to choose rightly. But not always: In "The Song of Roland" (written in the 9th or 10th century), the villain Ganelon has the best swordsman in France serve as his champion and loses anyway...even though a council of judges has determined that he was in the right. But the champion is defeated, because, the implication is, God had judged against him.

J

Roy C. Lackey — 27 Nov 2005, 08:21 · follows James Wynn

Rostrum wrote:

There is this one case where we see what I might call "might makes right" where Able goes to defend the pass and challenge all comers.

The title of Chapter 32 of WIZARD is, "Trial By Arms". From page 386, Able speaking first:

"You have to let me do this, Your Majesty. I've worn your favor in the lists. I'm your champion."

"Oh, Lady! Dear Lady of Skai! It's . . ."

"Ordained?" I suggested.

Gaynor's eyes brimmed with tears. "It's for me, too. So the king will see that -- that I'm not what he thinks. The Valfather will give the victory to the right, won't he?"

"That's what people believe, I know. It may be true."

There is more, including the specific mention of "Trial by Combat", but that's enough to prove my point. The queen's honor had been impugned; Able said he would vindicate her by winning the fight. He did, and Morcaine acknowledged the queen's innocence. (391)

-Roy

Chris — 27 Nov 2005, 10:28 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy said:

Note that Able said that he wouldn't wait because he was determined to implement the more common perversion of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others before they do unto you."

I can see why you'd think this, but on the other hand if that was his intention it's hard to explain why he goes so far out of his way to warn the captain off from fighting him. It would have been prudent, in that case, to let the dog stay hidden - he would still be able to claim "self defense" afterward. So what is the purpose of the things he says in the passage you quoted below - to ease his own conscience later? I will grant that some surface plausibility, but really anyone who can plan and manipulate someone into getting themselves killed in self defense is probably beyond such rationalizations.

Just before the section of text Chris quoted below is this:

"I told Gylf to let him [the captain] see him then, and he did. He had been lying in a corner where it was dark and he came up out of there like brown smoke but all solid and snarling.

"I can kill you if I want to," I told the captain. "I beat you before,

and I can beat you again. Gylf could kill you, too, and you won't stand the ghost of a chance against both of us."

Roy said:

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He

was alone with Able and Gylf. Able knew that the captain would not accept the terms he then offered --he said so -- which were the same terms that he had dictated before; the captain must knuckle under and leave Able in the captain's cabin. He also had no doubts about the winner of a fight against the captain. He said so. Both versions of the terms he demanded amounted to the same thing.

No, there is a difference between the sets of terms. In the first instance, it ends up being clear to everyone on board that the captain knuckled under and gave back the cabin (and the possessions he had stolen) when confronted. In the second instance, the captain is left with some ability to play it off as having reached an agreement. The hope appears to have been that the captain would take the opportunity to save face rather than fight a battle he couldn't win; Able obviously misjudged how personally the captain took it, and the fact that perhaps he (and his dog) looked a little weaker than they really were.

You might suspect that Able deliberately feigned that weakness to lure the captain into making such a move. I think there might be something to that, actually. It seems rather elaborate but the reasoning might be that if the captain were really bound and determined to attempt to kill him, he would take the opportunity there (and not some other time when Able might be taken unawares).

He stood up and Gylf growled. I was afraid he was going to grow into the black thing that had killed the outlaws, and I told him not to.

BTW, Able didn't want Gylf to turn into that big "black thing" because *he* was afraid of it. It wasn't out of concern for the captain or any sense of fair play.

I agree, and further, Able didn't seem to think Gylf *needed* to be the big black thing.

Returning to the problem of why the body needed to be disposed of so particularly, could it have something to do with the wounds inflicted by Gylf? I can't remember, at that point, if Able had resigned himself to the rest of the crew knowing much about the dog.

The captain may not have had a reserved seat in the church choir, but he was

definitely a victim of naked, unprovoked aggression on the occasion of his first encounter with Able. It was Able who initiated physical hostilities in

that first meeting, after the captain ordered him off his ship. If you want to say that the captain's display of a sword to punctuate his order made Able feel threatened and therefore justified in using force to gain the advantage, then you must grant the captain the same consideration in the second encounter. That's what Able was doing when he called up Gylf; punctuating his demands with a show of force.

I pretty much agree up to the last sentence. It seems that Able wanted all the cards out on the table. If there was a show of force, it was strictly for the benefit of the captain - and he would have been better served, ultimately, if he'd taken more account of it.

The captain had two choices -- submit or fight. He had been forced to submit, on pain of death, the first time. He was within his rights, as ship's captain, to execute Able for his crimes -- and Able's actions *were* criminal -- after fate allowed him to regain command of his ship.

Actually, I don't know about this. The captain would be considered one of the merchant class, miles below any type of aristocracy. I suspect that in the medieval order of things even the lowest, landless knight would consider the captain little more than a skilled peasant, even on his own ship. The captain would be within his rights to execute the members of his crew, but then they're even lower on the social scale.

But that raises the question of whether Able would count as a legitimate knight in that society, even though Disiri did knight him. Knights from other countries still count as knights even when they're not on ground ruled by their own sovereign, but this situation is less clear.

He was within his rights, as a man, to retaliate against the man who had harmed him.

He was bullied and humiliated, which makes it within his rights as a man to steal and attempt to murder? Sorry, there isn't much about the captain's attempted payback that is at all manly, or within his rights as far as I am concerned.

What the captain may have been guilty of is failing to recognize the hopelessness of his position in the second altercation.

Failing to recognize his inability to beat Able, by itself, would have caused him no difficulty. What the captain may have been guilty of is attempted murder.

That's one way to look at it. Call it whatever you like, but the captain's death is on Able's hands, if not his conscience. And if I were St. Peter, keepin' score, he ain't gettin' into Heaven. <g>

A death is on your hands to some extent even in an undisputed case of self defense.

James Wynn — 27 Nov 2005, 14:43 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

I said:

Part of the problem with the story, is that Wolfe has presented a world in which it is not self-evident that the Overcyns intervene in trials by arms, and people don't seem to expect them too.

Roy quoted:

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Gaynor's eyes brimmed with tears. "It's for me, too. So the king will see that -- that I'm not what he thinks. The Valfather will give the victory to the right, won't he?"

"That's what people believe, I know. It may be true."

Ah! I take it back. Trial By Arms in Wolfe's world is in agreement with the understanding of people in the "Dark Ages".

J

Roy C. Lackey — 28 Nov 2005, 08:51 · follows James Wynn

Chris quoted me and wrote:

The captain had two choices -- submit or fight. He had been forced to submit, on pain of death, the first time. He was within his rights, as ship's captain, to execute Able for his crimes -- and Able's actions *were* criminal -- after fate allowed him to regain command of his ship.

Actually, I don't know about this. The captain would be considered one of the merchant class, miles below any type of aristocracy. I suspect that in the medieval order of things even the lowest, landless knight would consider the captain little more than a skilled peasant, even on his own ship. The captain would be within his rights to execute the members of his crew, but then they're even lower on the social scale.

But that raises the question of whether Able would count as a legitimate knight in that society, even though Disiri did knight him. Knights from other countries still count as knights even when they're not on ground ruled by their own sovereign, but this situation is less clear.

The captain did not believe that Able was a knight, and said so. (K, 109) Able retorted, "You'd be smart to act as if you had [heard of him]." That is a not very subtle threat. The captain was not impressed, and made his own terms: "Otherwise, I'd teach you, Sir Able of the Shy Fart, how the authority of a captain is to be obeyed."

The captain had no reason to believe that Able was a knight; he sported none of a knight's trappings. Able's ego, at that point, took center stage. From this point on, the dispute was not about the conditions of passage to Forcetti. The captain had wounded Able's fragile, boyish ego. He had the temerity to answer threat with insult, something Able's pride couldn't handle. Earlier that same day, Pouk had asked. "You a fightin' man, sir? You look it."

"'I'm a knight,' I said; I always said that, because I knew I could never get people to believe me unless I believed it myself. 'I'm Sir Able of the High Heart.'" (102)

Able was a knight at this point only in his own mind, and by the whim of the dubious authority of a lesser being. Hardly anyone he met in the first book believed he was a knight. His lack of knowledge of things knightly led him from one difficulty to another. His ignorance almost got Pouk killed. He was willing to sacrifice almost anything or anyone to have his way, and what he wanted most, after Disiri, was to be a knight.

Right after boarding the docked ship, Able started feeling seasick. He thought he was going to puke and was afraid that people would see and make fun of him. He couldn't bear the thought, so was prepared to salvage his ego by turning on his new-found friend, who had been nothing but obsequiously helpful. "I knew I might throw up any minute, and I swore that I would make Pouk clean it up if I did." "And kill him if he would not do it." (K, 107) That's raw, unvarnished ego, to even consider killing a man because *he* might not want to clean up *your* puke. That was Able's mindset when he saw the captain, minutes later.

When Able later spoke of the sea battle with the Osterlings to Garsecg, the latter said:

"When a knight is on a ship, that ship flies his pennant from its foremast. Did yours do that?" I shook my head. "I don't have one, and I didn't know about it anyway. Maybe that's why the captain didn't think I was a real knight."

"In most cases, the Osterlings will not attack such a ship." (K, 163)

Clearly, had the captain believed Able to actually be a knight, he might have saved face with the crew by acknowledging the fact. The loss of his cabin could be written off as the deference due a knight by a sea captain, if such deference was in fact the social norm. Further, the whole damn battle with the Osterlings would probably never have happened had Able been a real knight, complete with pennant. Even without the pennant, had the captain believed Able to be a real knight, an impromptu one could have been contrived from cloth to keep away the Osterlings. That didn't happen because the captain didn't have any reason to believe Able was a knight. Even though Able was ignorant about pennant flying, you can bet the captain wasn't. He had nothing to lose by taking on a civil paying passenger, particularly a knight, and an advantage to be gained in the form of cheap insurance against an attack. Provided Able was a knight.

Able's behavior made any such accommodation impossible. The captain just wasn't the sort of man to cower in the face of bullying, and Able wasn't grown up enough to do anything but throw his weight around.

As for the charge of theft; so far as I am aware, Able's valuables never left the captain's cabin after he put them there himself -- at least not until Kerl disposed of them much later. Their fight wasn't about money.

I won't attempt to defend the captain's desire to kill Able, either at sea or in port.

He was bullied and humiliated, which makes it within his rights as a man to steal and attempt to murder? Sorry, there isn't much about the captain's attempted payback that is at all manly, or within his rights as far as I am concerned.

I feel the same way about Able's repeated attempts to force others to massage his ego. At least he had the excuse of being immature in KNIGHT. It's harder to excuse his behavior in WIZARD. Was he not morally responsible for the death of the gaoler in the dungeon? Sure, it was Org who actually killed and ate him, but he could have stopped him by calling out. He chose not to. (W, 401) Of course, since he was a god, this could be written off as divine whim.

I don't think anyone has tried to argue that Able didn't behave like a lout, particularly in KNIGHT. I have acknowledged that Wolfe chose to portray him that way deliberately. And I think we all agree that Wolfe intended he be seen as a Hero. As others have pointed out, real knights in regimented feudal societies weren't necessarily nice guys, certainly not the beloved figures of Arthurian romance. But Able's story is not really about knights, it's about Heroes. And, as Wolfe **always** does when he retells some story, he mixes things all up and turns them inside out. Adding Norse mythology and the realm of fairy to the mixture further muddles the picture.

It's natural for people on this list, almost by definition, to be favorably inclined toward Wolfe's fiction. It's understandable that there wasn't a lot of discussion here when KNIGHT came out; we had only half the story, and it was anything but straightforward. But it's been about a year since WIZARD was released, and there **still** hasn't been a lot of discussion about TWK. Why not? There was plenty of discussion as each volume of LONG SUN and SHORT SUN came out. What's different about TWK? Is it that people don't like it? Don't understand it?

I wish some of those people who wrote those wonderful blurbs on the covers would write some down-to-earth articles explaining exactly what they found "important and wonderful" about TWK.

-Roy

Michael Straight — 29 Nov 2005, 21:17 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 11/27/05, Roy C. Lackey <rlackey at stic.net> wrote:

There is more, including the specific mention of "Trial by Combat", but that's enough to prove my point.

I feel like you've forgotten what your point was.

The point I thought I was arguing with was, "Able is a jerk because he believes might makes right."

The examples you gave:

1. The stable hands - I think there's been pretty convincing argument that Able was right to insist that they take care of the horses.
2. The pass - I'm not sure if you understood my point. I'm arguing that his stand at the pass is a way of proving he is a better fighter and for that reason more worthy of wielding his opponent's weapons and armor.

Now you've got this other example:

On 11/27/05, Roy C. Lackey <rlackey at stic.net> wrote:

[ABLE:] "You have to let me do this, Your Majesty. I've worn your favor in the lists. I'm your champion."

"Oh, Lady! Dear Lady of Skai! It's . . ."

"Ordained?" I suggested.

Gaynor's eyes brimmed with tears. "It's for me, too. So the king will see that -- that I'm not what he thinks. The Valfather will give the victory to the right, won't he?"

"That's what people believe, I know. It may be true."

Here, Able acknowledges that this society believes that victory in combat would somehow prove the Lady's innocence, but he doesn't seem convinced of it himself. "It may be true" -- Able knows the Valfather could/might give victory to the right, but that seems to me a long way away from some kind of self-righteous certainty that victory in battle proves that he is right.

Able is convinced of the Lady's innocence and is willing to fight for her, knowing that his victory will be seen by others as vindicating her. Are you arguing that, had he lost, Able would have reconsidered and thought, "Maybe the Lady is an adulteress after all?"

-- Rostrum

James Wynn — 30 Nov 2005, 11:15 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

It's understandable that there wasn't a lot of discussion here when KNIGHT came out; we had only half the story, and it was anything but straightforward. But it's been about a year since WIZARD was released, and there *still* hasn't been a lot of discussion about TWK. Why not? There was plenty of discussion as each volume of LONG SUN and SHORT SUN came out. What's different about TWK? Is it that people don't like it? Don't understand it?

"Don't understand it" is a given. Not "don't like it", I think. But it is a fact that TWK is "more of the same" from Wolfe:

- 1) An intricate, well written story with lots of intriguing characters
- 2) A mysterious complex central character that is, for some undefined reason, destined to conquer all comers and rise to a predetermined glorious fate (it is unlikely Able would have been beaten in hand-to-hand combat with anyone at that remote pass even before he went to Skai: "the sea" would have "risen" within him and he'd have wiped out all comers); when I say "destined", I mean it much more strongly than would be applied to, say, Conan the Barbarian.

We've come to expect this from Wolfe.

Secondly, I don't think most people are troubled by Able's "loutish" behavior because a) they view complex, troubled heroes as EXPECTED from Wolfe and they don't see him as *as* loutish as Roy does. Why accept the Rajan's and Latro's actions (let alone Severian) and suddenly have a problem with Able? All are "heroes."

But I want to return to the problem of Wolfe fighting against his own esteemed reputation. TWK is far and away better and more original than 99% of fantasy fiction. Yet...

Imagine if Tolkien were a professional fiction writer and was handed the plots of "The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant" or "The Sword of Shanara" or "Harry Potter & the Philosopher's Stone" to write. The stories would still be much better than what was actually written, I've no doubt, but they would still be dwarfed by "The Lord of the Rings" because (among other reasons), that one came first.

I think Tor Publishing recognized this when they were creating buzz about the book. They were claiming this was Wolfe's first entry into juvenalia (and thus something "new" from Wolfe). That was simply not true. This is not a book "for kids". This book is not going to end up in any Middle School library, any more than any of the Sun cycle novels are, or the Latro stories-- much less than FIFTH HEAD.

All this was equally true about SHORT SUN (that it was more of the same from Wolfe), but, like NEW SUN, the plot was confused enough that there was a lot more required discussion and debate about what was going on. And in reality it was the second half of LONG SUN so people discussed it because they liked that novel.

Readers THINK they understand (basically) what is going on in TWK, so they don't get into discussing it. There's that "Mag" mystery and the mystery of "where" Able's world resides relative to Arthur's world, but not *much* after that. Also, fewer people know the Norse myths or the "knight" epics, so they feel incompetent to take on the thematic clues in the novel. And I think many people have become resigned (which they had not regarding NEW SUN when this list started) to the fact that some Wolfe mysteries will never be resolved--so why wrestle with it as much?

Consequently, while Wolfe will likely continue to produce novels that are read by other fiction writers, I don't think Wolfe *can* break out popularly with another novel until he produces something like "The Silmarillion of the New Sun". Having Wolfe EXPLAIN something...that would be new. But that might

spoil the books for people who have been crazy about them up 'til now-- people cannot possibly like Wolfe's explanation as much as their private theories of what is going on.

I could be wrong about this. After all, there's not as much discussion of LATRO as I think it deserves either.

J

Chris — 30 Nov 2005, 23:45 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Generally speaking I agree with the negative assessment of Able centering on his actions when he first met the captain. But treating the subjects in the order they appear here, there are some open questions.

Roy said:

The captain did not believe that Able was a knight, and said so. (K, 109)

The first obvious question is WAS Able a knight, regardless of whether the captain (or anyone else) recognized him as such? I think this is a contentious issue. A natural response would be that what a person **is** doesn't depend on how the random person on the street sees them; on the other hand it's quite clear that Able, at the very least, seems to believe at that point that being recognized as a knight is a (if not THE) key component to **being** a knight.

If you ultimately decide that Able was a knight at that point, then the captain's authority over him is null, and the captain is guilty of impertinence. Regardless of the truth of the matter, that seems to be the position that Able is coming from.

But I think we can speculate further about the captain that from his perspective it **did not matter** whether Able was "really" a knight or not. He would have treated a "legitimate" knight who happened to be down on his luck just the same, because his concern is not with a knight's virtue but with his power - and a knight without retainers or holdings or a powerful benefactor is, to him, just another man. The captain, I believe, establishes himself as a man who respects only power and force; I don't use this as a rationale for force to actually be used against him, but it certainly does present Able with a clear and limited set of options.

The captain had no reason to believe that Able was a knight; he sported none of a knight's trappings. Able's ego, at that point, took center stage. From this point on, the dispute was not about the conditions of passage to Forcetti. The captain had wounded Able's fragile, boyish ego.

If Able believed - **truly** believed - that he was a knight, then there would be more than just an issue of his ego. The captain would be intolerably out of line from the perspective of a knight.

But... the other passage you quoted really calls into question whether that's what he really believed, or if he simply knew at some level that this would be reaction that was expected of him if he truly believed what he claimed. While things blur a little bit in matters of belief, I think we both agree that there's more than a little of the latter in Able.

This (perhaps deliberately) raises the moral question of why the former should supposedly be justified while the latter is not.

Right after boarding the docked ship, Able started feeling seasick. He thought he was going to puke and was afraid that people would see and make fun of him. He couldn't bear the thought, so was prepared to salvage his ego by turning on his new-found friend, who had been nothing but obsequiously helpful. "I knew I might throw up any minute, and I swore that I would make

Pouk clean it up if I did." "And kill him if he would not do it." (K, 107)
That's raw, unvarnished ego, to even consider killing a man because *he*
might not want to clean up *your* puke. That was Able's mindset when he saw
the captain, minutes later.

Not to disagree with you - because if anything I evaluated this bit as being a little worse than just having a big ego - but this scene strikes me as especially strange every time I see it. Able is recording this long after the fact, and he sees fit to report it, but does not express any evaluation of why he deems it important. Here we expect some kind of expression of shame... or an explanation... or *something*.

And it's not just a need to report his mindset of the time, because he often leaves us very much in the dark about his mindset or motivations in various scenes. One is tempted to conclude that an older able reports this thought because he is ashamed of it, because it humbles him. Such a conclusion is almost obvious, but if so then there is something interesting about his means of expressing it.

I feel the same way about Able's repeated attempts to force others to massage his ego. At least he had the excuse of being immature in KNIGHT. It's harder to excuse his behavior in WIZARD. Was he not morally responsible for the death of the gaoler in the dungeon? Sure, it was Org who actually killed and ate him, but he could have stopped him by calling out. He chose not to. (W, 401) Of course, since he was a god, this could be written off as divine whim.

I wouldn't want to write it off in those terms in any event. And you again have pointed to something that seems interesting - recall that Able has had a run-in with another gaoler before, with somewhat similar results. There seems to be almost no indication that Able thinks that gaolers, as a species of sorts, are fit to live at all. Regardless of what you think of his treatment of the stablehands, this is not an attitude he expresses toward peasants or servants or slaves. It's not clear to me whether this hatred comes from something particular about Able, or whether it's supposed to be attributed to some kind of knight/gaoler antithetical relationship.

Perhaps it's in part a statement about how jails can corrupt one's humanity.

I don't think anyone has tried to argue that Able didn't behave like a lout, particularly in KNIGHT. I have acknowledged that Wolfe chose to portray him that way deliberately. And I think we all agree that Wolfe intended he be seen as a Hero.

But as in many of Wolfe's stories there's another question. Did *Able* choose to portray himself as a lout, or did it just come through naturally? Did Wolfe intend that he be seen as a hero, or did Able, or did both of them?

As others have pointed out, real knights in regimented feudal societies weren't necessarily nice guys, certainly not the beloved figures of Arthurian romance. But Able's story is not really about knights, it's about Heroes. And, as Wolfe *always* does when he retells some story, he mixes things all up and turns them inside out. Adding Norse mythology and the realm of fairy to the mixture further muddles the picture.

Yet I don't think it's even remotely possible to understand some aspects of the story without making the social context an integral part - by comparing how we interpret the actions of the characters with how they would interpret their own actions. In that sense it is "about knights".

It's natural for people on this list, almost by definition, to be favorably inclined toward Wolfe's fiction. It's understandable that there wasn't a lot of discussion here when KNIGHT came out; we had only half the story, and it was anything but straightforward. But it's been about a year since WIZARD was released, and there **still** hasn't been a lot of discussion about TWK. Why not? There was plenty of discussion as each volume of LONG SUN and SHORT SUN came out. What's different about TWK? Is it that people don't like it? Don't understand it?

Speaking for myself, I actually waited until the Wizard came out before reading the Knight, partly because I don't like to wait for the sequel and partly because I knew if I read them too far apart, I would probably have even more difficulty with the Wizard when it did come out.

In any event I suspect that some on the list haven't read the series yet, and may even have been put off reading it at all by the apparent lukewarm reception from those who have read it. It's hard to praise these books to the stars, obviously. But I've found them to be thought-provoking in a way that's similar to the "Soldier" series, over time. And there are characters in the story that I liked rather a lot... more unequivocally so than in most of Wolfe's books. Too bad one of them isn't Able.

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2005, 02:17 · in reply to Chris

Chris said:

The first obvious question is WAS Able a knight, regardless of whether the captain (or anyone else) recognized him as such? I think this is a contentious issue.

I think it is an objective certitude that Able was a knight. While people thought he was crazy when he told them that Disiri, the Queen of the Moss Elves, had knighted him, no seemed to doubt he would certainly be a knight **had it been true**. Granted, a knight of Aelfrice was properly lower than the most menial slave in Mythgarthr, but no one in Mythgarthr seems to realized that.

Another point: Able first arrived in Mythgarthr from Aelfrice (it is so hinted) after having died. If we assume he achieved the honor of rising to Mythgarthr as some kind of "sacrifice" by the Aelfs...achieving the honor in a comparative manner in which he got to Skai, then perhaps he really **was** a knight all along.

So why does Able sometimes talk as though knighthood is "something to be grasped"? Presumably, because although he knows he is a knight intellectually, he doesn't **feel** that he is one on the inside...he feels the need to earn it..to **make** it true. So he must do what is necessary on **his** part to make it "real".

Isn't this like the Catholic concept of **justifying** the grace of God?

But... the other passage you quoted [that he would make Pouk clean his vomit and kill him if he didn't] really calls into question whether that's what he really believed

This struck me as an outburst made by an immature person to an "employee" who he knows be a truly dependable friend. He's lashing out because he's sick and embarrassed and he knows he can lash out like that because the employee is a loyal friend. It's not right, but I know people who never grow out of that behavior.

Speaking of which, Pouk never seems to take Able's words to heart. He continuously affirms

that he is willing to work for Able for nothing. In fact, he only takes payment (when Able has it) as a token of his employment.

It is interesting that you compare TWK to the Latro books. Pouk seems to see something in Able that Able does not. That reminds me of the gods' reaction to Latro.

There seems to be almost no indication that Able thinks that gaolers, as a species of sorts, are fit to live at all.

Well, in the case of the gaoler in question, he intended to starve Able to death in prison. I didn't get the idea Able was the first person he had treated accordingly. Does mean he deserved death? I don't know. But Able didn't kill him. Did the gaoler deserve to have Able lift a finger to save his life? Able seems to have treated his replacements better. However, I recall a former convict saying the following about prison guards: "Prison guards are the lowest form of life. The convicts are in prison against their will. Prison guards are the only people in prison who chose to be in prison. They are the only people on earth who *would* choose to be in prison."

I don't know if Wolfe has heard the same thing. But I think the point of the prison was that Able, by virtue of who he was, *naturally* became the lord and master of where they put him. Put him in Hel and he would end up running the place.

J

Roy C. Lackey — 01 Dec 2005, 02:26 · follows James Wynn

Rostrum wrote:

On 11/27/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

There is more, including the specific mention of "Trial by Combat", but that's enough to prove my point.

I feel like you've forgotten what your point was.

My point, above, was to establish that "Trial by Combat" was, indeed, incorporated into TWK. See below.

The point I thought I was arguing with was, "Able is a jerk because he believes might makes right."

I don't know whether or not Able believed in the doctrine of might makes right. He is a jerk because he repeatedly used his superior might to push weaker people around in pursuance of his own ends, both petty and . . . 'heroic'. I have cited various examples of the petty -- and I haven't exhausted the list. Did he believe it was wrong to bully people? Apparently not. How did he rationalize his behavior, even to himself -- if he thought about it at all? By what "right" did he push people around? By his strong right hand.

The examples you gave:

1. The stable hands - I think there's been pretty convincing argument that Able was right to insist that they take care of the horses.
2. The pass - I'm not sure if you understood my point. I'm arguing that his stand at the pass is a way of proving he is a better fighter and for that reason more worthy of wielding his opponent's weapons and armor.

Able had no need or use for his opponent's weapons and armor when he made his stands. He already had a magic sword, gilded armor and a one-horned steed from Skai.

Now you've got this other example:

On 11/27/05, Roy C. Lackey <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:

[ABLE:] "You have to let me do this, Your Majesty. I've worn your favor in the lists. I'm your champion."

"Oh, Lady! Dear Lady of Skai! It's . . ."

"Ordained?" I suggested.

Gaynor's eyes brimmed with tears. "It's for me, too. So the king will see that -- that I'm not what he thinks. The Valfather will give the victory to the right, won't he?"

"That's what people believe, I know. It may be true."

Here, Able acknowledges that this society believes that victory in combat would somehow prove the Lady's innocence, but he doesn't seem convinced of it himself. "It may be true" -- Able knows the Valfather could/might give victory to the right, but that seems to me a long way away from some kind of self-righteous certainty that victory in battle proves that he is right.

"Ordained" was Able's suggestion. In context, I don't see how it can be interpreted as other than predestination.

Able is convinced of the Lady's innocence and is willing to fight for her, knowing that his victory will be seen by others as vindicating her. Are you arguing that, had he lost, Able would have reconsidered and thought, "Maybe the Lady is an adulteress after all?"

Uh, no. First of all, Able didn't believe he could be beaten by anyone, and he was right; there was no doubt about the outcome. He was a Hero, not just a knight. Second, Gaynor's "innocence" wasn't really at issue. The precipitating spat between her and Morcaine was a sham, a plan concocted by Earl Marshal Escan, with the complicity of both women (who each had divergent agenda but were in agreement on this one issue), to get Able an audience with Arnthor so he could deliver his Aelf message.

Gaynor was still a virgin, btw, and Morcaine would get her jollies no matter who won the combat.

-Roy

transient — 01 Dec 2005, 03:16 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Nov 30 2005, at 9:26 PM, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

Uh, no. First of all, Able didn't believe he could be beaten by anyone, and he was right; there was no doubt about the outcome. He was a Hero, not just a knight. Second, Gaynor's "innocence" wasn't really at issue. The precipitating spat between her and Morcaine was a sham, a plan concocted by Earl Marshal Escan, with the complicity of both women (who each had divergent agenda but were in agreement on this one issue), to get Able an audience with Arnthor so he could deliver his Aelf message.

So what do you think about Org, and their relationship? Org beat Able soundly, but then Uri, Baki, and Gylf jumped in. Rather than running away, which might have been fine, Org put his neck under Able's boot. Perhaps this was because they had made a deal before wrestling.

Despite the fact that Org was intrinsically evil and irredeemable was reinforced throughout the story, he demonstrated a definite loyalty to Able, and even extended that loyalty to whoever Able told him to. To the point of being really hungry at times. Also, even in the dungeon, when Org was apparently very big, and there was no little indication that Uri, Baki, or Gylf would jump in if he wanted to, he continued to serve Able. What do you think of Org's example of loyalty and honor?

Also, Able was defeated other times. Once in the pass, there was a similar turnaround where the Knight who had defeated him (the Knight of the Lions, was it?) made the decision to become the defeated once Able's friends - this time, the dead former wielders of Eterne - showed themselves.

transient — 01 Dec 2005, 03:53 · in reply to James Wynn

But... the other passage you quoted [that he would make Pouk clean his vomit and kill him if he didn't] really calls into question whether that's what he really believed

This struck me as an outburst made by an immature person to an "employee" who he knows be a truly dependable friend. He's lashing out because he's sick and embarrassed and he knows he can lash out like that because the employee is a loyal friend. It's not right, but I know people who never grow out of that behavior.

Speaking of which, Pouk never seems to take Able's words to heart. He continuously affirms that he is willing to work for Able for nothing. In fact, he only takes payment (when Able has it) as a token of his employment.

It is interesting that you compare TWK to the Latro books. Pouk seems to see something in Able that Able does not. That reminds me of the gods' reaction to Latro.

The passage about killing Pouk reminded me of Latro writing about - ack, lent my copy to my dad - "killing the man with the wooden leg." He said something like "I vow to kill him as soon as I get the chance" with a disturbing, casual bluntness. Latro, of course, was charmed by a sorcerer. Thinking about this passage in comparison to Latro brings to mind the fact that Able was under a geas also. Granted, by the end of Wizard he has seen Disiri while wearing the helm and he knows she is just a bunch of mud and reeds, but that doesn't change his feelings for her, so we know he was honestly and willfully in love with her. (Which we know from the very beginning actually, since Parka says that is how it is going to be.)

But still, Able goes through the story with a clouded mind - he doesn't remember what happened to him in Aelfrice before he awoke in Parka's cave. He is an idiot-savant carrying a message from the Aelfs to the king of the "true" humans. And in the middle of the story, he spends 20 years with even more of his memory taken away.

When he first boards the Western Trader he is a 6th grade kid who was suddenly put into an overgrown adult's body, seduced by a girl who had been his best friend for years of his life that

been taken from him, then told he has a big and nebulous task he has to accomplish. Which is maybe a parable for adolescence in general, but I am not trying to argue that. What I am trying to say is that maybe Able's heroism is a journey and he had a rough start.

I mean, at the end, he breaks an oath to the Valfather and it seems to be for the right reasons. The Valfather seems to be, if not proud, at least accepting of him.

David Duffy — 01 Dec 2005, 08:01 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Wed, 30 Nov 2005, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

I don't know whether or not Able believed in the doctrine of might makes right. He is a jerk because he repeatedly used his superior might to push weaker people around in pursuance of his own ends, both petty and . . . 'heroic'. I have cited various examples of the petty -- and I haven't exhausted the list. Did he believe it was wrong to bully people? Apparently not. How did he rationalize his behavior, even to himself -- if he thought about it at all? By what "right" did he push people around? By his strong right hand.

I think he acts **exactly** as a knight "should" act in all these examples. That is, men who **openly** carry weapons push around the lower orders, and defend their honour to the death over the slightest infraction. Peasants bearing arms would be immediately executed in many cultures. That the captain doesn't believe Able a knight is sufficient grounds (in this model) to immediately and literally beat him into submission -- and to kill him if he fails to submit. Force majeure is the lone knight's only source of authority. Furthermore, they may have affectionate relations with particular servants/household members, but they must never forget the gap ("familiarity breeds contempt").

The non-Christian knightly code we see is reminiscent of Bushido (although there is no textual evidence of a direct link), and, having just finished reading Perez-Reverte's "Captain Alatriste", machismo (he comments only the Spanish would duel about not getting a good view at the theatre). Some people approve of Heinlein's quip about politeness when the code duello is in operation.

Wolfe has a rather jaundiced view of human nature in general and of the power relations in past and present societies. He always has power coming from the barrel of a gun, which is relevant to the tone of his recent short stories eg disarming of the US populace appears in a couple in the last collection.

David Duffy.

Roy C. Lackey — 01 Dec 2005, 08:56 · follows David Duffy

Cliff wrote:

So what do you think about Org, and their relationship? Org beat Able soundly, but then Uri, Baki, and Gylf jumped in. Rather than running away, which might have been fine, Org put his neck under Able's boot. Perhaps this was because they had made a deal before wrestling. Despite the fact that Org was intrinsically evil and irredeemable was reinforced throughout the story, he demonstrated a definite loyalty to Able, and even extended that loyalty to whoever Able told him to. To the point of being really hungry at times. Also, even in the dungeon, when Org was apparently very big, and there was no little indication that Uri, Baki, or Gylf would jump in if he wanted to, he continued to serve Able. What do you think of Org's example of

loyalty and honor?

Able lost a wrestling match with an ogre, not a real fight; he elected to use no weapons. I don't know why Org wanted to stay around Able, unless he was feeling grateful for Able having forced Gylf off him. He was certainly loyal, but I think the concept of honor was beyond his capacity.

Someone mentioned Pouk; I don't understand Pouk at all. It's hard for me to conceive of someone so servile. I don't see what he gets out of it. He seems to me akin to those people who become ecstatic when they come near a celebrity, like those teenage girls who used to scream and faint at a Beatles concert. The embodiment of hero worship, I guess.

Also, Able was defeated other times. Once in the pass, there was a similar turnaround where the Knight who had defeated him (the Knight of the Lions, was it?) made the decision to become the defeated once Able's friends - this time, the dead former wielders of Eterne - showed themselves.

Leort had a brief advantage, or so he thought, but Able wasn't defeated. He was *trying* to lose so he could be free of his vow to defend the pass. (W, 101) He wanted to go looking for Disiri.

Two things I don't understand about that scene. One is the point of the Green Knight story, with Able in the role of Gawain. The other is why Leort was so rude to Gerda; it seemed out of character.

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 01 Dec 2005, 09:00 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey writes:

Two things I don't understand about that scene. One is the point of the Green Knight story, with Able in the role of Gawain.

Abel was the Green Knight, IIRC. Gawain gets let off with a nick on the neck because he behaves honorably even though the supernatural scales are weighed against him.

Roy C. Lackey — 01 Dec 2005, 09:17 · follows Andy Robertson

hartshorn quoted and wrote:

Two things I don't understand about that scene. One is the point of the Green Knight story, with Able in the role of Gawain.

Abel was the Green Knight, IIRC. Gawain gets let off with a nick on the neck because he behaves honorably even though the supernatural scales are weighed against him.

Able's original shield was plain green. He doesn't actually use the designation "Green Knight" when he relates his little story to Leort, but that's clearly the story. And Able doesn't get off with a nick -- according to him, his head was cut off and bounced across the floor. Able stood up, picked up his head, and tucked it under his arm. (W, 98)

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 01 Dec 2005, 11:04 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey writes:

Able's original shield was plain green. He doesn't actually use the designation "Green Knight" when he relates his little story to Leort, but that's clearly the story. And Able doesn't get off with a nick -- according to him, his head was cut off and bounced across the floor. Able stood up, picked up his head, and tucked it under his arm. (W, 98)

Abel was THE GREEN KNIGHT - the guy who turned up at Camelot and challenged Arthur's knights to the Beheading Game

Gawain was the knight who took up the challenge and lopped off Abel's head.

Abel picks up his head and requires Gawain to come to The Green Chapel in a year's time and get a return blow.

But when Gawain does - after some boudoir comedy with what was probably Morcaine - Gawain only gets a nick on the neck

<http://alliteration.net/gawain1.htm>

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2005, 13:57 · in reply to transient

So what do you think about Org, and their relationship?
Org beat Able soundly

That's an excellent point. Org **did** beat Able in hand-to-hand combat. I'm trying to imagine **why**. Able beat the giants, so it isn't because Org had no soul. Org beat Able by picking him up and throwing him. It reminds me of Antaios who could not be beaten in wrestling as long as his feet touched the ground. So Herakles picked him up and threw him.

J

Chris — 01 Dec 2005, 18:56 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Hold up just a second here. I've seen this claim, and claims like it, multiple times - "Able was a god and couldn't be beaten by anyone", etc. It's not true. Able is beaten fair and square in WIZARD, one on one, by the champion of the foreign army. There is no indication that he was throwing that fight, as he did with the Leopard Knight earlier.

Uh, no. First of all, Able didn't believe he could be beaten by anyone, and he was right; there was no doubt about the outcome. He was a Hero, not just a knight. Second, Gaynor's "innocence" wasn't really at issue. The precipitating spat between her and Morcaine was a sham, a plan concocted by Earl Marshal Escan, with the complicity of both women (who each had divergent agenda but were in agreement on this one issue), to get Able an audience with Arnthor so he could deliver his Aelf message.

Gaynor was still a virgin, btw, and Morcaine would get her jollies no matter who won the combat.

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 01 Dec 2005, 20:10 · follows Chris

hartshorn wrote:

Abel was THE GREEN KNIGHT - the guy who turned up at Camelot and challenged Arthur's knights to the Beheading Game

Gawain was the knight who took up the challenge and lopped off Abel's head.

You are, of course, quite right. And I was staring right at the title of the story and didn't realize the obvious.

But what was Able's point in telling Leort the story? And how did Able get from Valhalla to Camelot, if that's the path he took? And if that wasn't the path, when was Able ever in Camelot? It's not related in TWK. If he was some sort of Eternal Champion, why was he so ignorant about everything knightly at the beginning of his career in Mythgarthr?

And how does that possibility color questions about his parentage? To say nothing of brother Ben.

-Roy

Andy Robertson — 01 Dec 2005, 20:57 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey writes:

And how did Able get from Valhalla to Camelot, if that's the path he took? And if that wasn't the path, when was Able ever in Camelot? It's not related in TWK. If he was some sort of Eternal Champion, why was he so ignorant about everything knightly at the beginning of his career in Mythgarthr?

And how does that possibility color questions about his parentage? To say nothing of brother Ben.

All good questions. Abel's stint as TKG, in my opinion, took place while he was in Skai - between THE KNIGHT and THE WIZARD.

I suspect it was just one of those tasks the Valfather put his assembled valiant ones to - an attempt to uplift Gawain into the status of Overcyn.

Whether it's meant to have happened in some Mythgarthyr analog of Camelot or whether it happened in Midgard (our world / "America,") which also lies under Skai, I do not know.

Sure sounds like Abel, though

his body as brawny as any can be,
so bull-necked, big-thighed, bulky and square,
so long-legged, large-limbed, looming so tall
I can hardly tell if he were half troll,
or merely as large as living man can be --
a handsome one too; as hearty a hulk as ever rode horse. His back and chest were broad as a barrel, but he slimmed at the waist, with a slender stomach, and his face was well formed, with features sharp and clean --

hartshorn

transentient — 01 Dec 2005, 22:46 · in reply to Chris

On Dec 1 2005, at 1:56 PM, Chris wrote:

Hold up just a second here. I've seen this claim, and claims like it, multiple times - "Able was a god and couldn't be beaten by anyone", etc.

It's not true. Able is beaten fair and square in WIZARD, one on one, by the champion of the foreign army. There is no indication that he was throwing that fight, as he did with the Leopard Knight earlier.

You're right! And that foreign army went on to join Able in his cause, which completes the trifecta of opponents who beat Able, only to end up joining him.

James Wynn — 02 Dec 2005, 04:03 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

But what was Able's point in telling Leort the story? And how did Able get from Valhalla to Camelot, if that's the path he took?

I agree with hartshorn that this occurred in Skai in "the Age of Legends" (to borrow a "Time Bandits" term).

What was the point? Well, that depends to some degree on what Wolfe thinks the *meaning* of the Green Knight story is. It was intended to waive Leort off from taking his horse and Eterne as Able was warning him against, right? But as is often the case with Wolfe's heroes, the truth is useless because it is never credible.

Perhaps the story only "meant" that Able was an Overcyn and should be heeded...or that unless Leort is capable of having his head removed and still keeping an appointment the following year, anything he gets from Able will be more than he can handle.

J

Chris — 02 Dec 2005, 09:41 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Yes, the Green Knight (Able) gets his head cut clean off by Gawain - but by supernatural power laughs it off and walks away. The deal was that he would be able to deliver the same blow to Gawain a year later.

I don't know what the connection is with Leort, unless the idea is to remind him, when he had the advantage over Able, that he might not always have that advantage.

Able's original shield was plain green. He doesn't actually use the designation "Green Knight" when he relates his little story to Leort, but that's clearly the story. And Able doesn't get off with a nick -- according to him, his head was cut off and bounced across the floor. Able stood up, picked up his head, and tucked it under his arm. (W, 98)

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 03 Dec 2005, 17:59 · follows Chris

I've about exhausted this topic, but wanted to make one more observation.

Able, while still a stripling, didn't like the way he was treated by Svon. The clash of personalities lead to their fighting, though Svon, as a knight's squire, must have ranked further up the social ladder than a homeless peasant. Just a day or so later Able was made big by Disiri. His clothes would no longer fit him, so he went, naked, to the village. The elder Toug laughed at him and was knocked down, and Able began lording it over people. I wonder if Wolfe was consciously fleshing out a metaphor here -- showing that Able was literally "too big for his britches".

-Roy

James Wynn — 03 Dec 2005, 20:20 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Able, while still a stripling, didn't like the way he was treated by Svon. The clash of personalities lead to their fighting, though Svon, as a knight's squire, must have ranked further up the social ladder than a homeless peasant. Just a day or so later Able was made big by Disiri. His clothes would no longer fit him, so he went, naked, to the village. The elder Toug laughed at him and was knocked down, and Able began lording it over people. I wonder if Wolfe was consciously fleshing out a metaphor here -- showing that Able was literally "too big for his britches".

Well, Able never took much off of anybody even before. He beat up Svon and also beat up some boy robbers (was that Toug?).

J

transient — 03 Dec 2005, 21:00 · in reply to James Wynn

I was musing over this thread yesterday while parked in traffic. It seems to me that one ulterior motive Wolfe has in his writing is to shake the readers' sensibilities up a bit. It comes across as crotchety sometimes - like in the essay on Tolkein that came up in this thread two weeks ago, when he reminds the reader that once in the distant, antique 1950's, you had to mail-order your sf from the publisher, because there were no - gasp - amazon.coms or B&N. What I think he really wants to do is to see people realize that maybe their worldviews, and *in particular* their morale frameworks, are not absolute, and that in other worlds and other times, different sensibilities hold.

For example, the foreward to *Soldier in the Mist*, where he points out that slavery in ancient Greece was the humane, enlightened thing to do with conquered peoples, the only other real option being slavery. Severian becomes Autarch and disbands the Torturer's Guild, and says a piece about the Torturers being all good men, who happen to have a bad job.

It may be that these different worldviews are objectively harsher or less just than the worldview of we early 21st century English- literate. But not because the people in these other worlds of Wolfe's are primitive and barbaric and unenlightened, but just because the situation for them is different. Generally, (I think even in the relentlessly grim society of Nessus) Wolfe portrays people as always doiing the very best they can to do right.