

Osterlings

The Urth list — 9 messages, 6 voices, 07 Dec 2005

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Dan Rabin — 07 Dec 2005, 16:54

All the discussion of ingestion of blood reminds me that nobody is mentioning the Osterlings, who seem to have an inhumu-like motivation for their raids. Would anybody care to speculate as to how the dietary habits of the Osterlings figure into the grand scheme?

-- Dan Rabin

David Duffy — 08 Dec 2005, 10:34 · in reply to Dan Rabin

Stephenson's book is full of SFnal references and jokes of varying quality:

"They were a shade of brown that was darker than black" appears on P 530 of the Morrow hardback.

David Duffy.

David Duffy — 08 Dec 2005, 10:50 · in reply to Dan Rabin

On Wed, 7 Dec 2005, Dan Rabin wrote:

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-- Dan Rabin

Probably for the same reason as historical anthropophagy, to get spiritual/magical power. Traditionally, you want to eat the bravest of your enemies, IIRC. Coming back to the Aelf, they are magical and perform magic which humans don't, so even though they are lower, consuming their blood presumably has practical advantages. Ordinary wizards need the aid of "lower" elementals to do work, as Able does in the first half of the story. In _Castleview_ and here, Faery is conflated with death, so the Aelf want blood to become alive.

David Duffy.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Dec 2005, 17:30 · in reply to David Duffy

Dan R asks if anybody would

care to speculate as to how the dietary habits of the Osterlings figure into the grand scheme?

And David D responds

Probably for the same reason as historical anthropophagy, to get spiritual/magical power.

Uh, no. The Osterlings are described in the list of names in TK as "People who eat other people to become more human." This is indeed inhumu-like. This is part of a larger pattern in Wolfe of devouring someone to become him/her, which I presume to be a series of variations upon and especially perversions of the Eucharist.

--Dan'I

I do not fear Satan half so much as I fear those who fear him.

-- St Teresa of Avila

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

David Duffy — 09 Dec 2005, 04:57 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Thu, 8 Dec 2005, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

Dan R asks if anybody would

care to speculate as to how the dietary habits of the Osterlings figure into the grand scheme?

And David D responds

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--Dan'I

This is not that inconsistent an interpretation. So what's so good about being human ;)? Presumably a soul, but how much do you need, and are there lesser benefits?

David Duffy.

PS A reminder to reread the list of names!

don doggett — 10 Dec 2005, 04:04 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

--- Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

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"People who eat other people to become more human."

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in Wolfe of

devouring someone to become him/her, which I presume

to be

a series of variations upon and especially

perversions of the

Eucharist.

--Dan'I

I agree. The Osterlings are analogs of the inhumu and, farther back, of the Ascians in the NS books who seek to devour the commonwealth. This is what fascinates me about WK. I can see the Hierodules and the Neighbors

in the Overcyns. Severian in Able. Ymar in Arthur.
Erebus and Abaia in the Giants. I don't know if it's a
skeleton key, but GW certainly has his obsessions.

Don

Jeff Wilson — 10 Dec 2005, 05:02 · in reply to David Duffy

David Duffy wrote:

Stephenson's book is full of SFnal references and jokes of varying
quality:

"They were a shade of brown that was darker than black" appears on P 530
of the Morrow hardback.

Not necessarily a Wolfe-ism. I recall from a pre-BOTNS Reader's Digest article, a bright but
mentally ill boy incessantly asking his caregiver if there was a color darker than black, so he
could paint his bedroom that color, then add some black trim to brighten up the room.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Dec 2005, 21:00 · in reply to don doggett

I agree. The Osterlings are analogs of the inhumis and,
farther back, of the Ascians in the NS books who seek
to devour the commonwealth.

Not to mention the alzabo and those who use the elixer made from its glands. This is an
extremely common theme in Wolfe: rising to become something higher (Severian, Able);
seeking to rise but becoming a perversion of the higher thing (Typhon, the Gods of the Whorl);
doing so but then being raised anyway (some of the inhumis, Kypris); falling from your station to
something lower (the beastmen in NS, apparently the Osterlings); etc. A lot of it has to do with
(a) who you serve (b) why you serve them and (c) what you eat.

And there's bits of it in other books, notably 5HC...

--Dan'l

I do not fear Satan half so much as I fear those who fear him.
-- St Teresa of Avila
<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

Chris — 10 Dec 2005, 22:26 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l said:

Not to mention the alzabo and those who use the elixer
made from its glands. This is an _extremely_ common
theme in Wolfe: rising to become something higher
(Severian, Able); seeking to rise but becoming a
perversion of the higher thing (Typhon, the Gods of
the Whorl); doing so but then being raised anyway
(some of the inhumis, Kypris);

I am unsure whether Typhon falls cleanly into the category of a perversion or having been
"raised anyway", but I think there is a distinct element of both in there. Pas, to all appearances,
is far more benevolent than Typhon ever was; he tried to play a role and it ended up (at least
partially) defining him.

And there is a distinction to be made between merely "becoming" by some sort of osmosis, and active imitation (a very Christian theme, the way Wolfe generally uses it). Severian displays little of the latter (except on certain other levels which haven't been mentioned) and a striking amount of the former. Silk and Able, on the other hand, are mostly the latter, and Silkhorn would perhaps be a mix of both.

The inhumis are particularly interesting in this framework because it seems they *cannot* become more human by imitation alone. And this may be entirely beside the point, but when I think of the Osterlins becoming "more human" I cannot help but think of what happened when the inhumis became "more human" - the influence thus exerted is not necessarily going to be a civilizing or morally uplifting one.