

5HoC and BotNS

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 23 May 2006

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b sharp — 23 May 2006, 01:11

We know that Fifth Head of Cerberus started as a novella and became a novel with two added sections. I suspect that Wolfe considered it an imperfect work, perhaps because nobody could fully understand it. I think he hoped BotNS would perfect his 5HoC (novella) themes and become his masterwork. I think he succeeded in these goals but didn't guess that after 20 years of intensive analysis nobody would fully understand this one either.

Both 5HoC and BotNS depict a future in which a past era of earth is somewhat re-enacted. BotNS is further in the future and recreates a more distant past but the mood is similarly dark at least to start. Both stories focus on a protagonist thrust into an occupation at the underbelly of society (prostitution and torture). Both protagonists are tall and thin (as adults) with dark hair and eyes. Both stories feature an ingenue with violet eyes, dark hair and a prominent widow's peak. Cerberus (Wolfe) has 5 heads, while a mausoleum with 5 coffins holds a key to Severian's future (or origin?)

5HoC rather openly discusses the mystery of cloning but has a subcurrent mystery regarding shape shifters and human duplication. This mystery is blurted openly once, through "Veil's Hypothesis" or twice if you count #5's rant at Dr. Marsch then shrouded for the remainder. We get only glimpses and hints in the rest of the story despite its central importance. The boundary between beast and human is a subtext (I think that's the right term) topic as the story progresses.

BotNS (with UotNS) introduces time travel paradoxes and the boundary between human and angel is also explored. These topics are not especially veiled. But I believe the mysteries of cloning and shapeshifting remain in play and are veiled. In fact, each is mentioned (a la Veil's Hypothesis) only once or twice openly (I think). Cloning is mentioned by the old Autarch to Severian in reference to kaibits. And shapeshifting is mentioned explicitly in Melito's and Foila's stories. But I think both cloning and shapeshifting are hinted at and glimpsed indirectly all throughout BotNS.

Wolfe has stated his books tend to be a bit autobiographically inspired (was his first girlfriend violet eyed, dark haired with a widow's peak?). It is easy to guess that #5 and Severian are likely Wolfe proxies. I think others in this Community can offer other candidates. I think Wolfe may also have projected himself into one unlikely character, Agia.

I say this based on a description of Agia by Dorcas. Severian thinks Agia is more clever than him but Dorcas says no, " She's the sort of woman who's good at making puzzles for other people, but not at solving ones she didn't make herself. I think she thinks--I don't know--sidewise. So no one else can follow it."

I don't know whether Wolfe has undestimated his own intelligence or overestimated the intelligence of his readers but I can't imagine he foresaw that only the research and mind-melding functions of the magical tool called the internet would allow many of his

mysteries to finally approach solution.
But perhaps some mysteries will always remain.

-bsharp