

The Witches function

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 24 May 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4612>

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b sharp — 24 May 2006, 04:41

Macronaut asks:

What is the Cumean doing for humanity? How does her interaction with the obscure Witches' guild or her equally obscure presence in a disused part of the Botanical Gardens help redeem humanity? Or is she around for some entirely different reason?

I don't think there is a clear answer but here is my take: First, in the Claw appendix, Wolfe identifies all the inhabitants (except Ultan) of the Citadel as belonging to the class known as "servants of the throne". So in trying to discern purpose of the witches we should keep the needs of the autarch in mind.

The Cumaeon is described as "The Mother" by Merryn the witch and is probably their leader. The witches are described in various vague ways which tend to confuse them with our medieval concept of witch. Maybe there is some overlap. To understand them I look for the Wolfe pattern of giving one explicit, direct clue, out of context, then a lot of vague hints scattered here and there.

I think we get the explicit clue when we are told that witches raise the dead. Taking this literally I will say there are five ways on Urth to raise the dead. One is direct re-animation which only Severian (with one exception), as the head of his race and savior, can do. Another way is to create an eidolon from a dead person's memory. Only Tzadkiel and his agents appear able to do this.

So that leaves three ways for the witches to raise the dead and perhaps they are involved in all of them. We directly observe them sort of spiritually raising Apu-Punchau from an alien's memory in the seance scene, during a thunderstorm. Severian has a memory of the witches dancing wildly on nights of rain. I think this dancing is the same thing as the seance. Perhaps seances work best in the rain or perhaps it is the seance which causes the rain.

Another way to raise the dead is to use a pharmicon such as alzabo juice or the one in the old Autarch's phial to bring back their memories in another person's brain. We aren't told who procures these potions but the witches are associated both with Vodaulus (through Hildegryn), and the Autarch as servants of the throne. The Cumaeon herself, when seen in four dimensions, shows hundreds of faces. It is also noted that those who come to see the Cumaeon often don't come back. This could mean the Cumaeon is mining humanity for memories though we would hope a hierodule would show better behavior than that.

Another means of raising the dead would be cloning. Regarding cloning we are told only that kaibits are, "grown from the body cells of exultant women so an exchange of blood will prolong the exultants' youth". Who performs these cloning and leeching procedures? Are there any clues that the witches are involved in cloning?

When Severian is a boy he gets a tour of the witches tower. It is archaic and in disrepair. He sees gnostic designs, a lack of furniture, notes a colder temperature than outside. He sees The Cumaeen "staring through a glass tabletop at what appeared to be an artificial landscape inhabited by hairless, crippled animals".

This mysterious table is never explained. The only clue I can find comes when Severian sees Hethor thrown into the antechamber. He compares Hethor to- "one of the Chatelaine Lelia's hairless rats, rats that ran in circles and bit their own tails when one clapped one's hands." To me these hairless creatures seem similar to those in the Cumaeen's terrarium. It also reminds me of #5 in Fifth Head of Cerberus though for him it was usually mice that were used for his experiments in cloning, nerve splicing, limb grafting etc.

Master Gurloes tells that he received his introduction to sex from the witches but hints that it isn't such a pleasant experience and sends Severian instead to the House Azure. Severian later notes that the torturers try to send only pre-pubescent boys to visit the witches and the older apprentices tell terrible stories and even the bravest boys are afraid to go. The unpleasant aspect is not explained but perhaps they are treated like sample donors. Perhaps forced to perform again and again and again...ouch.

Severian also notes that screaming can be heard from the top of the witches tower, screams different than those of lunacy or agony that the torturers hear from their clients. Are these sexual screams? Severian notes it can't be their clients screaming, "for in the sense we used that word, they had none". Perhaps it is autoeroticism or Bacchanal lesbianism? I don't see how that adds to the story at all. But there is another part of reproduction during which women might scream, and clones do need a place to grow. Or perhaps the witches treat themselves as sample donors. Egg harvesting is supposed to hurt.

On Urth, it is the cacogens/hierodules who provide all the advanced technology. There seems to be numerous examples of advanced biotechnology going on but for some reason it is always veiled from the reader. Perhaps there is some convention that such things aren't to be discussed. Baldanders is clearly doing human biotech, but as to the process we are only told about: machines standing in impenetrable relation to one another with uses beyond conjecture, a "homunculus" or two and an eviscerated woman. We do see his monstrous results.

Typhon had his head grafted onto another body and probably had some cloning done too (mandragora). In his round room we also find many impenetrable devices and structures though Severian's descriptions here are thorough enough that we might suspect microscope lab cubicles and maybe morgue type shelves. The old leech who treats Severian in the ziggurat is similarly secretive about his knowledge though his technique suggests something similar to the exultant-kaibit relationship that the old Autarch divulged. Note that Gurloes is unaware of where the kaibits might come from or their true function.

So, I propose the reason the witches are so veiled and mysterious is because most of their activities involve biotechnology. I know this evidence is not conclusive but this the best I can come up with using the clues I was able to find.

One last speculative note: We know that the one of the autarch's primary goals is to keep society stagnant and in stasis until the New Sun comes. We learned in Fifth Head of Cerberus that cloning is a path to stagnation and stasis. And witches are servants of the throne.

-bsharp

b sharp — 24 May 2006, 18:43 · follows b sharp

p.s. more biotech: I forgot to mention the Cumaean's Talos-like human body transformation abilities, as touted by Merryn. I also forgot the apostrophe.

-bsharp

Macronaut — 29 May 2006, 18:19 · in reply to b sharp

b sharp wrote:

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I don't think I am the first to suggest this, but to me this suggests an electron microscope -- you know, those images where they show you all the icky dustmites living in your eyelashes, etc.

I think this provides some support for the idea of the Witches as biologists, though I think some of the other references put forward as evidence that the Witches are genetic engineers are less convincing. Still -- if you want to go down this path, a couple of thoughts:

- 1) Master Gurloes says that the witches are an unpleasant place to experience sex, but that they willingly serve this function (even for the despised torturers). Why? Perhaps to collect genetic material.
- 2) for all those man-beast hybrids out there, the Witches' tower is located conveniently close to the Beast Tower.
- 3) Merryn is described as someone who is beautiful but in a way that suggests sickness or illness. This could be a reference to her spirit or nature, or even a disease of some type, but it could also be read as pallor (from hunching over a microscope for long periods of time indoors) or even a "workplace" disease caused by exposure to chemicals or biological agents.

This said, I still don't think I've heard a good explanation (no offense to b) of what the witches do for the Autarch and what the Cumaean's relationship to the witches is.

Macronaut

b sharp — 30 May 2006, 11:10 · follows Macronaut

Hey Macronaut, one more thing....your post:

I don't think I am the first to suggest this, but to me this suggests an electron microscope

reminded me that I thought Severian's description of Typhon's round room and the equipment there made it sound like a microscope lab and morgue. What do you think?

-bsharp