

shapeshifting Hethor

The Urth list — 12 messages, 7 voices, 28 May 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4630>

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b sharp — 28 May 2006, 06:14

There is a BotNS problem posed by Severian: How could Hethor get a slug the size of a horse to follow Severian through pampas, towns, mountains and jungles?

Robert Borski proposes the slug is really Mother Pyrexia who, perhaps 30 years ago, was sealed in a house and when they opened it she had become "something strange" like what you'd find in a piece of rotten wood. It is a pretty good theory but I feel it falls short in the absence of multiple Mother Pyrexia sightings. When we first meet Hethor he has four companions, including a gray haired woman. But later he travels only with one of them, the small man, Beuzec.

I think the Pyrexia story does serve an important purpose. It provides some of the evidence Roy is looking for (certainly debatable evidence) that shapeshifters exist on Urth. And it provides a necessary addition to one of the shapeshifter rules we have learned from Foila's story. I think we learn that confinement doesn't just prevent a shapeshifter from changing, but also forces the shapeshifter to take their original form. The rule that a shapeshifter will always show a part of its true nature is also in effect.

Armed with these tools I think we could suggest that the slug is Hethor, or more accurately, Hethor is really a slug. Just as the brown larkish Armiger's daughter is always brown, brown, brown, Hethor is always gray in clothing with gray hair. He is always presented as disgusting. Wolfe takes pains to make Hethor take off his greasy hat toward the end of Shadow. This shows his receding hair has left a gray wavering crest which sounds rather slug-like in appearance to me.

Robert Borski is at a loss to explain how Mother Pyrexia might get into the antechamber but shapeshifter rules offer a clear solution. Once confined, Hethor is forced into his natural form. This idea might suggest a similar reversion to original form occurs when Hethor follows Severian into the tunnels beneath the Jungle Sorcerers village.

And I almost cringe to mention that it also offers a solution to the problem of the incident in the tunnel beneath the Piteous Gate.

p.s. I think Hethor's mirrors are adequate to explain the notules, the glowing worms and perhaps the salamander. The pteriopes are still an issue I'm working on.

-bsharp

mournings glory — 28 May 2006, 17:05 · in reply to b sharp

From: "b sharp" <bsharporflat at hotmail.com>

There is a BotNS problem posed by Severian: How could Hethor get a slug the size of a horse to follow Severian through pampas, towns, mountains and

jungles?

Armed with these tools I think we could suggest that the slug is Hethor, or more accurately, Hethor is really a slug.

Except that the slug almost certainly perishes in the burning hut of the village of the sorcerors during the duel of magic, whereas Hethor is still alive when reencountered in _Citadel_. I suppose you could argue the slug escapes by either natural or artificial means (specular teleportation?), but it certainly never appears again -- ditto for the salamander, which has plunged to its death back to Thrax.

More likely both disappearances result because neither beast is Hethor, just as Father Inire is neither grieving boatman nor curator of paintings, but an alien with absolutely no reason to impersonate either Rudesind or 'Cas's husband.

em

b sharp — 28 May 2006, 20:02 · follows mournings glory

mourning glory writes:

Except that the slug almost certainly perishes in the burning hut of the village of the sorcerors during the duel of magic.

We know the notules got sealed in a bottle. We know the salamander crashed down a cliff. The text says nothing about the fate of the slug. Does your assumption rest on the fact that the other monsters seem vanquished? Or because Mother Pyrexia didn't like fire? Or just because there was a fire and it seems like a good way for a slug to die?

also:

More likely both disappearances result because neither beast is Hethor

Mg you don't say what you base your likelihood and almost certainties on, though I think my post on building a mental mosaic applies. Shapeshifting does not fit the picture you have built of Urth and so you discard it whenever you see it. That's fine. For you. I used to accept the mirrors only view. Now I don't and that led me to add a shapeshifter view. I used to think the entire citadel was a spaceship. Now I don't and that led me to new insight about the Atrium of Time.

For me, your theory (which simply involves mirrors?) ignores important questions. Such as how a giant slug gets out of and into small bits of sailcloth. And why Wolfe dedicated large portions of BotNS to stories and legends.

For some readers, BotNS is a story about a cool guy in a black cape with an awesome sword. Foila's story is just a tv commercial to kill time until we get back to the real plot. For others, every word, tree branch and drop of river water contain hidden meanings and connections to other parts of the story. I think we can all agree that part of Wolfe's genius is that he can appeal to both sorts of readers and everything in between.

I am not satisfied with my current mental picture of Urth and I am on a quest to fill in a lot of missing pieces. I am documenting that journey. I think my posts are best suited for those like me, still questing. If you already have a complete picture of Urth and how its pieces fit together then my posts may not be of much interest. I still have missing pices but I'm catching up.

-bsharp

mournings glory — 28 May 2006, 21:25 · in reply to b sharp

From: "b sharp" <bsharporflat at hotmail.com>

mourning glory writes:

Except that the slug almost certainly perishes in the burning hut of the village of the sorcerors during the duel of magic.

We know the notules got sealed in a bottle. We know the salamander crashed down a cliff. The text says nothing about the fate of the slug. Does your assumption rest on the fact that the other monsters seem vanquished?

No, it rests on the assumption that the slug's never, ever seen again -- not once -- the same as the salamander. Ergo, the most reasonable assumption is that it's dead, killed in the fire -- like that parrot in the Monty Python sketch, it's bleeding demised.

Mg you don't say what you base your likelihood and almost certainties on, though I think my post on building a mental mosaic applies. Shapeshifting does not fit the picture you have built of Urth and so you discard it whenever you see it.

Absolutely not true. I pointed out the likely shapeshifting ability of Venant and could make an interesting case for the voiceshifting alzabo; I've no trouble with the notion of Hethor being a shapeshifter nor for Mother Pyrexia being the degenerate terminus of one such witcherly attempt; and in many respects Baldanders, some of the Megatherians, and the undines are beings that have chosen to change their shapes. This does not, however, mean that Father Inire periodically morphs himself into the two individuals you claim just because other individuals are able to shift their appearance.

For me, your theory (which simply involves mirrors?) ignores important questions. Such as how a giant slug gets out of and into small bits of sailcloth.

Actually, I've never endorsed the mirror theory. In my opinion the slug is able to enter the House Absolute the same way the white wolves are, via any number of hidden or forgotten entrances; if you'll notice when Severian discusses these, it's in the same chapter that he remarks about how he's never re-encountered the mysterious Beuzec -- Hethor's other companion -- and thereby reasons he's left by these same portals.

I am not satisfied with my current mental picture of Urth and I am on a quest to fill in a lot of missing pieces. I am documenting that journey. I think my posts are best suited for those like me, still questing. If you already have a complete picture of Urth and how its pieces fit together then my posts may not be of much interest.

Yes, but you're also posting them in an on-line forum devoted to discussing the works of Gene Wolfe. I've recently been accused off-list of being a bully in here, and hope this doesn't further damage my credibility or rep; nevertheless, if you're only interested in applause or self-gratification, maybe you shouldn't masturbate in public.

Now please, sir, let's see what you come up with next!

em

Chris — 28 May 2006, 21:47 · in reply to mournings glory

MSG said:

bsharp said:

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beings that have chosen to change their shapes. This does not, however,
mean
that Father Inire periodically morphs himself into the two individuals you
claim just because other individuals are able to shift their appearance.

Right, and I think it may again be time to point out that interpretation of Wolfe tends to get into an occasional lunatic (in the memorable sense presented in Foucault's Pendulum) circle. That is, we tend to latch on to one thing and then attempt to explain *everything* in terms of it, finding connections everywhere we go - because it is easy to find connections of some sort or another.

This came up in the infamous clone wars on this list, that were alluded to recently, where (to exaggerate a bit) we started to reach a point where everyone in the Urth cycle was a clone of Typhon (though I am not sure whether we established whether, through some elaborate time-travelling trick, Typhon was a clone of Typhon as well).

Borski's book, I think, is quite prone to this sort of thing. Given the frequent mentions we've been seeing of that book, it might be good to keep this in mind.

Roy C. Lackey — 29 May 2006, 03:54 · follows Chris

msg wrote:
Absolutely not true. I pointed out the likely shapeshifting ability of
Venant

Bsharp is right about that; it was Zak who was the false Epitome. (URTH,
123)

Yes, but you're also posting them in an on-line forum devoted to discussing
the works of Gene Wolfe. I've recently been accused off-list of being a
bully in here, and hope this doesn't further damage my credibility or rep;

So you're a bully, huh? I wonder what that makes me. Well, I've been in worse company. <G>

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 29 May 2006, 03:57 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Bsharp wrote:
And it provides a necessary addition to one of
the shapeshifter rules we have learned from Foila's story. I think we
learn that confinement doesn't just prevent a shapeshifter from changing,
but also forces the shapeshifter to take their original form.

[snip]

Armed with these tools I think we could suggest that the slug is Hethor, or
more accurately, Hethor is really a slug.

[snip]

Robert Borski is at a loss to explain how Mother Pyrexia might get into the antechamber but shapeshifter rules offer a clear solution. Once confined, Hethor is forced into his natural form.

Well, which is it? It can't be both ways. If confinement forces a shapeshifter into true form, why didn't Hethor immediately turn back into a slug (or whatever) when he was thrown into the antechamber? It didn't happen. He was put into the antechamber at breakfast time and was there all day. It was at night when the creature came snuffling in the dark and Severian escaped with a slime-covered Jonas. If Hethor had the leisure to wait until dark in order to follow one rule before violating the other rule against shapeshifting while imprisoned, who's enforcing these rules?

And I almost cringe to mention that it also offers a solution to the problem of the incident in the tunnel beneath the Piteous Gate.

That would violate another of your rules; the place was packed with prying eyes and it wasn't too dark to see him shift.

-Roy

b sharp — 29 May 2006, 05:13 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy says:

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And I almost cringe to mention that it also offers a solution to the problem of the incident in the tunnel beneath the Piteous Gate.

That would violate another of your rules; the place was packed with prying eyes and it wasn't too dark to see him shift.

Excellent points Roy. I agree completely.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 29 May 2006, 05:17 · in reply to mournings glory

On 5/28/06, mournings glory <mourningsglory at hotmail.com> wrote:
I've recently been accused off-list of being a bully in here, and hope this doesn't further damage my credibility or rep; nevertheless, if you're only interested in applause or self-gratification, maybe you shouldn't masturbate in public.

Ummm.

While I'm not interested in accusing you (or anyone else) of being a bully, I do feel that this is just a wee bit OTT.

--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>

Macronaut — 29 May 2006, 19:26 · in reply to b sharp

I remember when Robert Borski first proposed that the salamander was Mother Pyrexia. I found it unconvincing then and still do.

The alcalde of Saltus described Mother Pyrexia as something that could be handled by a group of men armed with torches and maybe simple weapons (hence similar preparations for the breaking of Barnoch's house). Claw p. 223. We know from his description that the Pyrexia-thing disliked fire and light.

By contrast, the salamander in Thrax is completely unafraid of men, even soldiers armed with pyrotechnic lances, and must be untroubled by fire because its body is constantly setting fires in Thrax while it hunts Sev, without apparent negative reaction from the creature. Most subtle but most convincing to me, Wolfe portrays the salamander as a completely otherworldly being that seems to perceive the world with an alien set of senses that are ill-adapted for operating in an Urth environment, eg. bad vision, but good at sensing things like the Claw. As I see it, that's too alien to be something adapted for life on Urth, and the Claw-sensing ability is too convenient a power for a random creature that just happens to have evolved in Saltus in time for Sev to show up -- it sounds much more like an alien brought to Urth for the specific purpose of hunting Sev.

Furthermore, there's the fact that the alcalde and his men seem to have put an end to Pyrexia 18 years ago -- surely if they hadn't the alcalde would have mentioned that she's still out there somewhere -- a nice, chilling touch from someone who clearly likes to tell stories. Then there's the fact that, if the salamander is the same Mother Pyrexia we're talking about, she's been hanging about Saltus and/or Thrax for the last 18 years without being noticed or dealt with -- again, all highly improbable.

OTOH, I think the Pyrexia story has some intriguing connections to the salamander. The most interesting comes from the earthly legend of the salamander. That legend is based on the real earthly amphibian (often red in color), which was thought (incorrectly) to love fire because people often observed them scurrying out of fires. The real reason they did so is that salamanders like wet damp places like rotting logs, and people like to burn logs, and when you do any salamanders inside will run out to escape the heat.

With this in mind, look at the alcalde's description of the Mother Pyrexia-thing: "I'll say this -- a woman sealed in the dark long enough can become something very strange, just like the strange things you find in rotten wood, back among the trees." Claw p. 223. This seems to tie her to the salamander. It can cut both for and against the transformation theory: it may be only to suggest, like the difference btw the earthly salamander and the mythological one, that she isn't the alien salamander Sev encounters in Lictor.

But then there's the name folks gave her: Mother Pyrexia. The medical definition for Pyrexia is an increased body temperature as the result of infection or other pathology -- including microorganisms (I've also seen it defined as fever of unknown origin). That can be read to support a theory that she transformed into a creature associated with heat, and thus Borski's theory that she became the salamander.

But ultimately, I think the two beings are so different that we have to look for a different explanation. So I speculate that she was (1) some type of alien masquerading as a human, whose confinement without food in the dark somehow broke down her disguise; or (2) a human transformed by the same type of mysterious process that Jonas cites as explanation for the mine-apes' descent from men (Claw p. 260). Another question: what did that sweet old lady do 18 years ago that was so bad she got the brick house treatment?

I may have mentioned some of this back in the days when I was responding to Borski, so if I'm repeating I apologize.

Macronaut

b sharp — 30 May 2006, 07:45 · follows Macronaut

Again Macronaut, I appreciate this post.

Robert Borski did propose that Mother Pyrexia was a slug. And that Beuzec was the Salamander. I think he uses the Pyrexia name to suggest the slug is afraid of fire and I think Mournings Glory picks up on that in his almost certainty that the Slug died in the fire in the Village testing room.

Tying "Pyrexia" to a slug didn't make much sense to me either when there is a salamander around. To me the weakness of that theory is that the Salamander is practically invulnerable in Thrax, facing Severian with a sword and all the archon's horses and men firing energy weapons. The alcalde of Saltus and his men are only armed with stuff like torches, staves and piletes (okay I don't know what that is and internet isn't helping. Def. of pilete anyone?). But maybe Salamander Pyrexia was too weak to scorch the Saltusians after being sealed in a house for a while.

Reminds me, I forgot to make this point to Mournings Glory in "shapeshifting Hethor". You find great importance in the disappearance of the slug after the village scene. But all of Hethor's creatures make one appearance and then disappear, except one. Both Severian and I demand that be explained. Why is the slug such a Hethor favorite it had to be used two or three times? Maybe four.

-bsharp

don doggett — 31 May 2006, 02:25 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

--- "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
msg wrote:

I've recently been accused

off-list of being a
bully in here, and hope this doesn't further damage
my credibility or rep;

So you're a bully, huh? I wonder what that makes me.
Well, I've been in
worse company. <G>

-Roy

A bully's a person who picks on someone who can't
fight back. I don't think that's a problem here.
bsharp seems able to give as good as he gets. Besides,
it adds character to the list when you guys get
grouchy.

Don (who carries a pointy stick)