

Gene, David & other Cerberids, true, false and possible

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 Apr 1998

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Robert Borski — 04 Apr 1998, 15:39

The thought occurs to me, if the narrator's name is Jean, then what is his brother's name, who is presumably also a clone. I think that it's reasonable to suppose the clones are numbered; indeed, the title should alert us to that. Then, the narrator is Jean-5? and his brother is Jean 6? (I can't remember if the brother is younger or older).

First time in here. Just to say that my idea was always that the brother was not a clone but rather a control in the experiment. But, who is Number 1?

Including Rostrum's ingenious "Jeannine =3D Jean 9", but surely the narrator is number 5 because he is the 5th head of Cerberus, which is to say, of his family. As his father says, if he was counting clones the narrator would be Number Fifty, not five.

This is why Aunt Jeannine initially says "That number's either far too low or too high." It's too low because there are more like 50 clones, and it seems too high to her because she doesn't know about David. But if you count her, the narrator, his "father", Mr Million and David you get five.

As for who is Number One, I'm not sure that question applies, but I suppose you could say it's the father, as he's the current master of the brood.

There seems to be a lot of confusion about the Wolfe/Cerberus clan of Sainte Croix and who represents which number and who is or who is not a clone.

Let me venture my interpretation, Procustean and convoluted though it be.

Gene Wolfe #1 is the original patriarch, our narrator's great grandfather. He is naturally born and it is his parents we see when Aunt Jeannine has the sepia photograph fetched for Number Five. This ur-GW begins the cloning experiments, producing Gene Wolfe #2. Mr. Million is GW #1's unbound simulator and since the process used to produce him is fatal we may assume GW #1 has chosen suicide--although he is "reincarnated" in the robot. Since GW2's clonal birth precedes Mr Million's mechanical birth, I've chosen to designate Mr Million GW #3.

Aunt Jeannine is not a clone, but the biological daughter of GW #1. Or as Dr Marsch explains, "...the woman you call your aunt. She is in reality daughter to an earlier--shall we say version'?'--of yourself." Number Five's father later refers to her as an experiment. Consequently, she gets no number.

GW #2 produces the next generation of Cerberus, our narrator's "father," a clone of a clone, who in the text is called Maitre. He is GW #4.

Maitre clonally produces GW #5, our narrator. David, however, is GW #4's biological son and Aunt Jeannine surmises Maitre has used one of her girls to produce him. (Maitre also later acknowledges him as his biological son).

Or as the most pertinent quote puts it, with Maitre speaking to Number Five in the library, and all brackets mine: "We seek self-knowledge. You [#5] are here because I [#4] did and do, and I am here because the individual [#2] behind me did --who was himself originated by the one [#1] whose mind is simulated in Mr. Million [#3]."

With me so far? Of course, I would be remiss if I did not mention that there were many other GW variants produced, but all of these were either experiments or throwaways and were in no way connected with the operations of running Maison du Chien, as GW #'s 1-5 are/were.

This leaves one last sibling to discuss: Number Five's sister. She is mentioned by Aunt Jeannine in Number Five's first encounter with her: "Have you a sister, Number Five?" And: "Your father had a sister--why shouldn't you?"

I submit that Phaedria, Number Five's early love interest (and later his housemate) is his sister, the biological daughter of Maitre.

Here follows my reasoning: (1) We know Maitre has brokered children, so it is not unreasonable to assume he's sold a daughter. (2) Phaedria, when we first meet her, has a broken ankle, linking her with Aunt Jeannine, who is also crippled; as Aunt Jeannine is to Maitre, Phaedria is to Number Five; (3) 'Phaedria' derives from Phaedra, a mythological figure who attempts incest with her stepson; (4) much to Number Five's surprise, Maitre allows a large number of his girls to attend the play Number Five and Phaedra are in; perhaps sinisterly he hopes to see a liaison develop between Number Five and Phaedria, an even more perverse variation on his quest for self-knowledge. (Then again, isn't cloning a nonsexual version of incest?)

Hope this helps, rather than engenders confusion. FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS was the first work of Gene Wolfe I ever read and it remains my favorite to this day--nice to see finally some interest in it!

Robert Borski (who hopes soon to return to his lurker status)