

In Glory Like Their Star

The Urth list — 11 messages, 6 voices, 30 Jan 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4788>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Nathan Spears — 30 Jan 2007, 06:00

I'm just reading Saltwater Strains, and I wondered if anyone could provide me with some insight into this story.

(spoilers follow)

This is the jist of the story as far as I can tell. An alien landed on Earth, presumably at some distant point in the past when humans didn't possess any technology. He lands in the desert in a big ship, goes out on a smaller craft to explore. The smaller craft's navigation malfunctions and he can't get back to the ship until he is aided by a human, who thinks the alien is a desert spirit. He promises the human godhood via nanobots while in a desperate, starved condition. After he reaches the ship he realizes that he can't provide what he promised and takes off, burning the waiting human to death "in glory like their star."

In typical Wolfean fashion the narrator (the alien) is telling the story both to the reader and to another group of humans, in some other location, who also think the aliens are gods. The narrator also makes reference to other creatures on board the main ship, but as if they are not part of his species. I think.

Anyway, I feel as if I have missed some crucial piece to this story to provide it with some significance. Wolfe talked in the introduction about reading another story about aliens appearing to humans that he found lacking, so maybe I should be familiar with whatever he is responding to.

Any help?

Roy C. Lackey — 18 Apr 2007, 06:14 · follows Nathan Spears

Back on Jan. 30, Nathan Spears wrote:

Anyway, I feel as if I have missed some crucial piece to this story to provide it with some significance. Wolfe talked in the introduction about reading another story about aliens appearing to humans that he found lacking, so maybe I should be familiar with whatever he is responding to.

Any help?

It is less important to know which story Wolfe was trying to "fix" than it is to know why he thought it needed fixing. Given that he is a religious man, it might be assumed that he resented the implication that people in Old Testament times were more gullible than modern people, unable to distinguish between superior technology and divinity. But he also says in the introduction that once a story has been 'fixed' by rewriting it, that the result is a "different story".

Consider that the story is told from the point of view of the alien. The alien never tried to pass himself off as a god; indeed he took pains to tell the Earthlings that he was not. Still, the natives were clearly treating the aliens as gods (burnt offerings on an altar). And he stated flatly, "They revere our ship and us." (69) And the camel rider obviously thought the alien some sort of desert spirit.

The alien became disoriented in the desert and would have died but for the human's help. To bind the human to him he made rash promises, promises that were based on logic but invalid; the biologies of humans and aliens were incompatible. When he reached safety, the alien was intellectually honest enough to try to make good on his promises and honest with himself to admit that he couldn't do it. But he lacked the moral or ethical wherewithal to admit his failure to the camel rider. He fired up his engines and blasted off, killing the deluded believer who died "in glory like their star".

The sun would rise again the next day; not so the camel rider. Still less would he "live forever".
(73)

I don't know what the moral is, exactly, but the twist on the aliens-as-gods story seems to be that the better judgement of technologically superior beings can be seduced by too much reverence. Remember, the title phrase is taken from a pronouncement made by the alien. Maybe he intended it as irony.

If Wolfe were not a religious man, I might be tempted to say that *he* intended the title to mean that belief itself was sufficient, whether the belief be true or not. Glory is a slippery word.

-Roy

Tony Ellis — 18 Apr 2007, 20:43 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy C Lackey wrote:

I don't know what the moral is, exactly, but the twist on the aliens-as-gods story seems to be that the better judgement of technologically superior beings can be seduced by too much reverence.

This sort of chimes with my reading, but I'd go further and say that we're being invited to feel outright contempt for the narrator. Far from being divine, he's an ass.

Almost the first thing he says is that from his perspective, the tribe who want his people's help are indistinguishable from the enemies they want help against. Fair enough: that sounds like a suitably godlike opinion, we're all equally sinful in the sight of God, etc, etc. Then he casually says he may indeed propose that his people destroy their hosts. He's sitting there, eating this tribe's food, and coolly toying with the idea of exterminating them. Not nice.

But then, his whole attitude towards these natives is arrogant and condescending. "The natives could not understand, saying again and again in many different ways that knowledge is a thing one uses. We sought to explain by the Great Disciplines that such things have nothing to do with its value... It is the interior change that suffices, the transformation that rewards... They could not understand."

Such lofty conceits about knowledge may be all very well when you're a technologically advanced super-race, but these are primitive tribespeople. From their perspective *of course* knowledge is a thing one uses, and maybe if the narrator and his people deigned to impart a little they could learn things like medicine and irrigation.

Everything the narrator says sounds superficially wise and gnomic, and then, when you think about it, pompous and unrealistic. I'm reminded of the Laputians in Gulliver's Travels - a race so advanced they're actually kind of stupid. Even more than that I'm reminded of a Wolfen type: the arrogant academic. Doctor Marsh is one; Doctor Finch in Trip, Trap, another. In particular I'm put in mind of Quoquo in Feather Tigers, the alien psychologist who decides we must have

built our computers to lie because sometimes he can't understand what they mean. Like Quoquo, our narrator sets off alone into the wilderness, in the belief that he is a match for it, and like Quoquo he finds that he is not.

There's a little detail here which for me is the icing on the cake. The narrator is mysteriously reticent about exactly what went wrong in the desert, but it comes out anyway: "I told him of my plight... my machine broken when it collided with a stone." Yes, you read that correctly: the mighty, godlike alien drove his vehicle into a rock.

As Roy says, the narrator makes rash promises to the camel rider that he can't fulfill - and isn't it telling that the thing he promises and can't deliver is eternal life - precisely the thing God is supposed to provide.

As for morals... Brian Aldiss has said, with his tongue only slightly in his cheek, that the theme of science fiction is "hubris clobbered by nemesis", and I think this story is a good example of that. More specifically, I think Wolfe wants us to think - in his typical convention-inverting way - not about the vast gulf between primitive people and a super-race with godlike technology, but about the far vaster gulf between such a race and actual divinity. Either you *are* God, or you're infinitely far from God. The sci-fi cliché of godlike aliens fails to deal with what 'godlike' really means, and possibly that was what bugged Wolfe about the original story he read.

Nathan Spears — 18 Apr 2007, 22:10 · follows Tony Ellis

Thank you both for your replies. My reading was more sympathetic to Mr. Lackey's, but I wish I hadn't taken the book back to the library so I could read the story again to look for Mr. Ellis' perspective. From what I can remember of the tone of the story I think that Mr. Ellis is putting something of his own ideas into it - I remember feeling that the narrator was basically blackmailed into making promises he couldn't keep to the native. He was dying in the desert and this local thought he was a djinn or something.

Having thought about it since then, I find your comments revealing in another direction I hadn't considered. The story also acts as an illustration of not only how badly, but how strangely, relations between vastly technologically different cultures might be. The alien finds himself in the strange position of having to emulate a god in order to survive, ie The Man Who Would Be King. He tries to make good on his word but is unable to, and his shame leads him to abandon the native in question.

I still am not clear on why he has to incinerate the native as he leaves. That bit weighs favorably for Mr. Ellis' reading as far as I can see.

However:

"It is the interior change that suffices, the transformation that rewards"

This statement is Christian doctrine reworded, so I doubt that Wolfe intended it to bathe the narrator in a negative light. Unless the story is also a commentary on how missionaries to impoverished nations should spend more time distributing medicine and less time evangelizing.

----- Original Message -----

From: Tony Ellis <tonyellis69 at btopenworld.com>

To: urth at lists.urth.net

Sent: Wednesday, April 18, 2007 3:43:26 PM

Subject: (urth) (Urth) In Glory Like Their Star

Roy C Lackey wrote:

I don't know what the moral is, exactly, but the twist on the aliens-as-gods

story seems to be that the better judgement of technologically superior beings can be seduced by too much reverence.

This sort of chimes with my reading, but I'd go further and say that we're being invited to feel outright contempt for the narrator. Far from being divine, he's an ass.

Almost the first thing he says is that from his perspective, the tribe who want his people's help are indistinguishable from the enemies they want help against. Fair enough: that sounds like a suitably godlike opinion, we're all equally sinful in the sight of God, etc, etc. Then he casually says he may indeed propose that his people destroy their hosts. He's sitting there, eating this tribe's food, and coolly toying with the idea of exterminating them. Not nice.

But then, his whole attitude towards these natives is arrogant and condescending. "The natives could not understand, saying again and again in many different ways that knowledge is a thing one uses. We sought to explain by the Great Disciplines that such things have nothing to do with its value... It is the interior change that suffices, the transformation that rewards... They could not understand."

Such lofty conceits about knowledge may be all very well when you're a technologically advanced super-race, but these are primitive tribespeople. From their perspective *of course* knowledge is a thing one uses, and maybe if the narrator and his people deigned to impart a little they could learn things like medicine and irrigation.

Everything the narrator says sounds superficially wise and gnomic, and then, when you think about it, pompous and unrealistic. I'm reminded of the Laputians in Gulliver's Travels - a race so advanced they're actually kind of stupid. Even more than that I'm reminded of a Wolfian type: the arrogant academic. Doctor Marsh is one; Doctor Finch in Trip, Trap, another. In particular I'm put in mind of Quoquo in Feather Tigers, the alien psychologist who decides we must have built our computers to lie because sometimes he can't understand what they mean. Like Quoquo, our narrator sets off alone into the wilderness, in the belief that he is a match for it, and like Quoquo he finds that he is not.

There's a little detail here which for me is the icing on the cake. The narrator is mysteriously reticent about exactly what went wrong in the desert, but it comes out anyway: "I told him of my plight... my machine broken when it collided with a stone." Yes, you read that correctly: the mighty, godlike alien drove his vehicle into a rock.

As Roy says, the narrator makes rash promises to the camel rider that he can't fulfill - and isn't it telling that the thing he promises and can't deliver is eternal life - precisely the thing God is supposed to provide.

As for morals... Brian Aldiss has said, with his tongue only slightly in his cheek, that the theme of science fiction is "hubris clobbered by nemesis", and I think this story is a good example of that. More specifically, I think Wolfe wants us to think - in his typical convention-inverting way - not about the vast gulf between primitive people and a super-race with godlike technology, but about the far vaster gulf between such a race and actual divinity. Either you *are* God, or you're infinitely far from God. The sci-fi cliché of godlike aliens fails to deal with what 'godlike' really means, and possibly that was what bugged Wolfe about the original story he read.

James B. Jordan — 18 Apr 2007, 23:50 · in reply to Nathan Spears

At 05:10 PM 4/18/2007, you wrote:

However:

"It is the interior change that suffices, the transformation that rewards"

This statement is Christian doctrine reworded, so I doubt that Wolfe intended it to bathe the narrator in a negative light. Unless the story is also a commentary on how missionaries to impoverished nations should spend more time distributing medicine and less time evangelizing.

I have not reread the story before writing this post, so this may be off the mark; but a comment: This is not Christian but Gnostic doctrine. Wolfe is a good sacramentalist, and for him the Kingdom is surely more than mere interior change. Good intentions do not suffice. Jesus came to change the world, not merely inward feelings. And I can say that Wolfe does believe that unless impoverished people are fed, they cannot hear. The gospels really show the same thing: Jesus helps people and then asks them to listen. Now I need to find this story and re-read it.

Nutria

Nathan Spears — 19 Apr 2007, 02:54 · follows James B. Jordan

At 05:10 PM 4/18/2007, you wrote:

However:

"It is the interior change that suffices, the transformation that rewards"

This statement is Christian doctrine reworded, so I doubt that Wolfe intended it to bathe the narrator in a negative light. Unless the story is also a commentary on how missionaries to impoverished nations should spend more time distributing medicine and less time evangelizing.

I have not

reread the story before writing this post, so this may be off the mark; but a comment: This is not Christian but Gnostic doctrine. Wolfe is a good sacramentalist, and for him the Kingdom is surely more than mere interior change.

I didn't mean to imply that it was the entirety of Christian doctrine. I think Matthew 5 and Mark 7 show that Jesus was as interested in the state of men's hearts as with their behavior. I also didn't intend to start a lengthy religious debate, esp. over terminology, so please eschew that path if at all possible. But my feelings about the aliens in the story were initially that they were trying to "enlighten" man by helping him learn what it had taken their race millennia to learn - and that this teaching, while aphoristic, was meaningful.

Mr. Ellis expressed the idea that Wolfe might have been feeling indignation at the idea that "primitive" man would have been unable to distinguish between alien and god. I think that if that is our starting position, we ought also to feel indignation at the prospect of aliens "teaching" us anything - philosophical or practical. "We were alive before you got here, so we were doing something right," as it were. How would we (the primitive humans) be any more able to distinguish between "good technology" and "bad technology" than we would good/bad philosophy? For instance, aliens that gave us nuclear technology, or something superior, might be calculating that, as an immature, fractured species, we would manufacture superbombs galore from our own materials and blow ourselves off the planet, saving the aliens a lot of expense. That's not a bad idea for a story, actually.

My point is that I don't think Wolfe was trying to draw that distinction (that the alien "teaching" was bogus or useless) - he would have focused on it more. I think the distinction is between the alien's teaching and what the alien actually does to the human - he betrays his own doctrines

and murders this (quasi) innocent guy.

Roy C. Lackey — 19 Apr 2007, 06:34 · follows Nathan Spears

Nathan Spears wrote:

I still am not clear on why he has to incinerate the native as he leaves.

That bit weighs favorably for Mr. Ellis' reading as far as I can see.<

The alien must have known that the blast from his engines would kill the native, so the question becomes: Was it his *intention* to kill?, and, if so, why? The alien had been safe inside the scout for three days; neither the desert nor the native were a threat to him.

Was the native's death unavoidable? That is, was it merely the unfortunate consequence of the native's faith, his refusal to abandon the hope of supernatural reward? Like a moth, he stubbornly hovered too near the flame that inevitably consumed him? He just wouldn't (couldn't?) give it up and go home?

They had killed and eaten the camel; there was no oasis at hand. The native couldn't breathe the air in the scout. Presumably he could not eat the alien's food. Did the alien kill him to hasten a prolonged death in the desert? Or was the alien callously indifferent to the native's fate, blasting off without giving it a thought?

The story title suggests otherwise. It goes back to what was meant by "glory". There are many definitions, largely religious in nature. There is one other usage of a form of the word in the story, and it is unusual enough to call attention to itself. After regaining the scout: "It was a triumph, and I inspected every part of the scout glorying, and tested every instrument in every possible way, recalling my navigator. They functioned without a flaw, all of them. I was ecstatic." Perhaps this usage is a clue to the other.

-Roy

Tony Ellis — 19 Apr 2007, 15:51 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Nathan Spears wrote:

...my feelings about the

aliens in the story were initially that they were trying to "enlighten" man

by helping him learn what it had taken their race millennia to learn

and that this teaching, while aphoristic, was meaningful.

If the aliens were trying to teach the natives compassion and mercy, fair enough. But they're not. They're telling them that the value of knowledge doesn't lie in its use - an absurd thing to tell a primitive people who are just starting out on the road to civilisation. Let's not forget Wolfe is an engineer as well as a Christian.

Mr. Ellis expressed the idea that Wolfe might have been feeling indignation at the idea that "primitive" man would have been unable to distinguish between alien and god.

Actually, that's not what I said at all. Of course a primitive race will be unable to distinguish between alien and god - there's no blame in that. What I said was that Wolfe might have been feeling indignation at modern writers making the same mistake.

Nathan Spears — 19 Apr 2007, 16:52 · follows Tony Ellis

Mr. Ellis expressed the idea that Wolfe might have been feeling indignation at the idea that "primitive" man would have been unable to distinguish between alien and god.

Actually, that's not what I said at all. Of course a primitive race will be unable to distinguish between alien and god - there's no blame in that. What I said was that Wolfe might have been feeling indignation at modern writers making the same mistake.

Apologies - I was thinking of this remark by Mr. Lackey:

"Given that he is a religious man, it might be assumed that he resented the implication that people in Old Testament times were more gullible than modern people, unable to distinguish between superior technology and divinity."

don doggett — 19 Apr 2007, 18:24 · in reply to Nathan Spears

--- Nathan Spears <spearofsolomon at yahoo.com> wrote:

Apologies - I was thinking of this remark by Mr. Lackey:

"Given that he is a religious man, it might be assumed that he resented the implication that people in Old Testament times were more gullible than modern people, unable to distinguish between superior technology and divinity."

iirc I think Wolfe may have said something along these lines somewhere, that it's a mistake to think ancient people were less sophisticated than their modern counterparts.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

brunians at brunians.org — 19 Apr 2007, 20:05 · in reply to don doggett

--- Nathan Spears <spearofsolomon at yahoo.com> wrote:

iirc I think Wolfe may have said something along these lines somewhere, that it's a mistake to think ancient people were less sophisticated than their modern counterparts.

It is one of his major themes, as it is one of my major positions. I'd say that a good fifty percent of the things we talked about, last we met, were related to this one way or another.

As an aside, there are no primitive people. All the people extant, and all of the people we know about historically have basically the same level of development, in various different directions.

Who was that fool who came to the conclusion that the Trobriand Islanders didn't know where babies came from? Malonovski or something like it. And then there was Richard Burton, measuring penises across the continent of Africa. I bet the Africans had a lot to say about him. And Margaret Mead, who can forget her? I understand the grandchildren of her informants still tell stories as to what an idiot she was, how gullible.

.