

Peace - Elm trees and empty dreams

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 06 Jun 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4838>

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Matthew King — 06 Jun 2007, 15:39

Caveat lector: spoilers for Peace below.

The elm tree that falls in the first line of Peace is planted on the grave of Alden Dennis Weer, the book's narrator. As the Sergeant says in The Pirates of Penzance, "This is perplexing."

Leaving aside the mystery of a story told by a ghost, is there any significance to the tree being an elm? I cannot find, in the archives of this list, any discussion on this particular topic.

Googling for elm folklore found this tidbit:

<http://www.treesforlife.org.uk/forest/mythfolk/elm.html>

It is interesting to note that both the yew's and the elm's mythology is intimately bound up with death and the transition into the Underworld, and that both woods were used to such deadly effect in mediaeval warfare. Elm's connection with death does not end there, as its wood is traditionally used to make coffins, though the wood's durability underground may also play a part in this choice. Perhaps people who knew elms well were reminded of their own mortality when remembering the elm's reputation for dropping large boughs without warning on otherwise still, warm days; "Elm hateth man, and waiteth" as the old saying goes.

More to the point, and the reason for this post, is the elm tree we encounter in Virgil's Aeneid. Full disclosure: I haven't read The Aeneid yet. I made the connection when listening to some lectures from The Teaching Company.

In Book VI, Aeneas visits the underworld to consult with the spirit of his father, Anchises. The Cumaean Sybil leads him to the underworld and guides him through it. "Just in the gate and in the jaws of hell," as Dryden translates, Aeneas finds an elm tree. Here's the relevant passage from Dryden:

<http://classics.mit.edu/Virgil/aeneid.6.vi.html>

Full in the midst of this infernal road,
An elm displays her dusky arms abroad:
The God of Sleep there hides his heavy head,
And empty dreams on ev'ry leaf are spread.
Of various forms unnumber'd specters more,
Centaurs, and double shapes, besiege the door.
Before the passage, horrid Hydra stands,
And Briareus with all his hundred hands;
Gorgons, Geryon with his triple frame;
And vain Chimaera vomits empty flame.
The chief unsheath'd his shining steel, prepar'd,
Tho' seiz'd with sudden fear, to force the guard,

Off'ring his brandish'd weapon at their face;
Had not the Sibyl stopp'd his eager pace,
And told him what those empty phantoms were:
Forms without bodies, and impassive air.

Here's the same passage in a modern translation by A. S. Kline:

<http://www.tkline.freemove.co.uk/VirgilAeneidVI.htm>

In the centre a vast shadowy elm spreads its aged trunks
and branches: the seat, they say, that false Dreams hold, thronging, clinging beneath every
leaf. And many other monstrous shapes of varied creatures, are stabled by the doors, Centaurs
and bi-formed Scylla, and hundred-armed Briareus, and the Lernean Hydra, hissing fiercely, and
the Chimaera armed with flame, Gorgons, and Harpies, and the triple bodied shade, Geryon. At
this, trembling suddenly with terror, Aeneas grasped his sword, and set the naked blade against
their approach: and, if his knowing companion had not warned him that these were tenuous
bodiless lives flitting about with a hollow semblance of form, he would have rushed at them,
and hacked at the shadows uselessly with his sword.

Now, we know Wolfe is familiar with The Aeneid, if only from his borrowing of the Cumaeen.
Peace could well be described as a book of "empty dreams", with "tenuous bodiless lives flitting
about".

If the elm before Acheron did inspire the elm upon Alden, I wonder whether we might find in
Peace some traces of Briareus, Geryon, and the others. Note that Dante, guided by Virgil, meets
these monsters in the Inferno (which I also haven't read).

David Duffy — 07 Jun 2007, 06:12 · in reply to Matthew King

On Wed, 6 Jun 2007, Matthew King wrote:

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significance to the tree being an elm? I cannot find, in the
archives of this list, any discussion on this particular topic.

I am positive that someone stated some time ago on the list that elms were planted on graves
to keep the spirit underneath at rest. However, a quick google suggests that usually rowans
appear in this context.

I did find a review of Thomas Campanella's *Republic of Shade*,
a history of elm plantings in America: "a central symbol of New
England and American life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries...planted on wedding days
or on the birth of children", and then in bulk to "ornament" towns. So planting them is very
characteristic of the time and place the story is set. I think *Peace* is, among other things, an
elegy to that era (and thought a lot about it reading *My Antonia*).

So they may stand in as an American equivalent of the rowan (those planted are, I didn't know,
a native tree), as osage orange is to *TWK* and Faery.

Cheers, David Duffy.

David Duffy — 07 Jun 2007, 06:24 · in reply to David Duffy

I do have work to do, but apparently in the Iliad...

Andromaca, the fine wife of Hector (Iliad, VI, 418)...says the following about her Pelasgian father, Etion of holy Thebes, who had been killed by Achilles.

Achilles, says she, had not taken from my father his weapons, but had burnt them together with his body, and over his ashes had erected a mound, while the mountain nymphs had planted elm trees around his grave [2].

[2. The custom of planting elm trees near funeral mounds had once also existed in the parts of Dacia. So, in a Romanian ballad, the hero Toma Alimos, feeling that his death is near, tells his horse to take him to the grave with five elms trees].

http://www.pelasgians.bigpondhosting.com/website1/03_01.htm

David Duffy.