

# What the elm?

The Urth list — 11 messages, 6 voices, 06 Jun 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4839>

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.

---

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Jun 2007, 17:21

H'mmm.

Sometimes in looking at the way we discuss Wolfe, I am reminded of a pair of comments Alan Moore made during the publication of the classic comic, WATCHMEN, which he wrote.

Early on, he mentioned in an interview that "everything" in the comic meant something.

During its twelve-month span of publication, there was an incredible correspondence on Usenet, in which (it seemed) every single detail of every panel of each issue was dissected, compared to details in other panels, etc.

After several months of this, Moore said, in another interview, that, while everything in the comic meant something, not everything meant \*much\*.

This is \*not\* a put-down to the work Matthew King has done on the elm. I believe it very likely that Wolfe had at least some of this in mind when he chose an elm tree for Weer's grave decoration. The question in my mind, though, is this: how much does knowing this affect my reading of the book? Does knowing the significance of the elm help me to piece together the crabbed and mysterious timeline of Weer's life; to understand why he is (seemingly) trapped in this particular afterworld; or any of the mysteries associated with the individual accounts?

If not, then this is a case of "means something, but not much."

But, it still means \*something\* ...

(wanders off, scratching head and pondering the significance of short-person behavior in penal-depressive and other highly ambient domains)

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

-----

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

---

Matthew King — 06 Jun 2007, 18:19 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Jun 6, 2007, at 12:21 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

This is \*not\* a put-down to the work Matthew King has done on the elm. I believe it very likely that Wolfe had at least some

of this in mind when he chose an elm tree for Weer's grave decoration. The question in my mind, though, is this: how much does knowing this affect my reading of the book? Does knowing the significance of the elm help me to piece together the crabbed and mysterious timeline of Weer's life; to understand why he is (seemingly) trapped in this particular afterworld; or any of the mysteries associated with the individual accounts?

Knowing (or guessing) the connection to the Aeneid doesn't help in the interpretation of Peace unless Wolfe borrowed much more than just an elm. Peace is packed so full of fragmentary and subverted stories that another classical allusion is hardly illuminating.

If we were to unearth Vergilian (or Dantean) monsters in the menagerie of Weer's musings, or if we find some other Aenean analogue, then perhaps the connection would be more than merely interesting.

Matthew

---

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 06 Jun 2007, 18:31 · in reply to Matthew King

On 6/6/07, Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:  
Knowing (or guessing) the connection to the Aeneid doesn't help in the interpretation of Peace unless Wolfe borrowed much more than just an elm. Peace is packed so full of fragmentary and subverted stories that another classical allusion is hardly illuminating.

If we were to unearth Vergilian (or Dantean) monsters in the menagerie of Weer's musings, or if we find some other Aenean analogue, then perhaps the connection would be more than merely interesting.

Indeed!

Well, I have suggested before in this forum that ... oh, damn, suddenly my mind is going blank on characters ... the voice Weer hears calling him (over the intercom?) at the "end" of the book ... is a psychopomp, trying to lure him forth from his grave/Purgatory to Heaven. There might be something in classical myth that fits here.

I also believe fwiw that the elm itself was trapping him (though it may not have been a \_physical\_ elm a-tall, a-tall) in his coffin/sleep/death until the book's "beginning." Thus its fall begins the process that ends with the voice of the psychopomp; the next thing to happen is Weer's (self-)judgment and his journey to his eternal fate.

I do not speculate on what that fate may be.

That being the case, I was perhaps a \*little\* disingenuous in using your post as a launching place for my own comment on the potential for over-zealous analysis of the Lupine textus; it was actually quite a bad example for my point, given that I think the elm is, in fact, hugely significant.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

-----

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire

salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

---

**Matthew King — 06 Jun 2007, 18:49 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes**

On Jun 6, 2007, at 1:31 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:  
That being the case, I was perhaps a \*little\* disingenuous in using your post as a launching place for my own comment on the potential for over-zealous analysis of the Lupine textus; it was actually quite a bad example for my point, given that I think the elm is, in fact, hugely significant.

Your comment was well-launched and worthy of attention. I would even pervert it into a principle:

Because Wolfe delights in the appropriation of people, places, and things, we should not consider an allusion or borrowing to be important to the interpretation of a work -- unless the connection sheds light on a **\*\*problem we have already identified\*\***.

The discovery of an allusion, in other words, should not spawn new problems in interpretation. Unless it obviously does, which I am sure will be the case somewhere in the Lupine corpus.

---

**Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Jun 2007, 19:00 · in reply to Matthew King**

On 6/6/07, Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:  
The discovery of an allusion, in other words, should not spawn new problems in interpretation.

I like that phrasing best.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

-----

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

---

**Daniel D Jones — 06 Jun 2007, 21:49 · in reply to Matthew King**

On Wednesday 06 June 2007 14:19, Matthew King wrote:  
On Jun 6, 2007, at 12:21 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

This is *\*not\** a put-down to the work Matthew King has done on the elm. I believe it very likely that Wolfe had at least some of this in mind when he chose an elm tree for Weer's grave decoration. The question in my mind, though, is this: how much does knowing this affect my reading of the book? Does knowing the significance of the elm help me to piece, uh, piece together the crabbed and mysterious timeline of Weer's life; to understand why he is (seemingly) trapped in this particular afterworld; or any of the mysteries associated with the individual accounts?

Knowing (or guessing) the connection to the Aeneid doesn't help in the interpretation of Peace unless Wolfe borrowed much more than just an elm. Peace is packed so full of fragmentary and subverted stories that another classical allusion is hardly illuminating.

If we were to unearth Vergilian (or Dantean) monsters in the menagerie of Weer's musings, or if we find some other Aenean analogue, then perhaps the connection would be more than merely interesting.

The elm standing by the gates of Hell (or the underworld) ties in quite well with Borski's "Weer as the Devil" musings. If you haven't already read it, the essay is definitely worth the time, regardless of whether or not you find it convincing:

<http://www.siriusfiction.com/PaxBorskii.html>

---

JWillard — 07 Jun 2007, 06:50 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

On 6/6/07, Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:

The discovery of an allusion, in other words, should not spawn new problems in interpretation.

I like that phrasing best.

I think the mistake is to assume an allusion is just some sort of homage or a wink and a nod: I don't know if it's that simple. I'm starting to think more and more that Virgil and Dante are extremely important to Wolfe (Averns, anyone?). Given their contributions to the Roman Catholic faith, this would not be surprising. I'm curious if there are any connections to Augustine, as well. (And someone might have pointed all of this out, but I have less and less time to read and confer with previous posts.) Recently started reading *Inferno*, and Dante's choices of focus are striking to a Wolfean: Charon is there, of course, and Nessus carries Dante across one of the rivers. I think it's quite possible that the *Book of the New Sun* is Wolfe playing with the *Divine Comedy*.

Another influence, that I've never really seen anyone address, is Nabokov. Wolfe admits the influence, and Nabokov is a tricky, tricky man, and I believe Wolfe learned much from him. Here is a passage from the introduction to the *Annotated Lolita* (Which Wolfe might well have read) called, fittingly, *Nabokov's Puppet Show*, and which, when I read it, blared "Wolfe!" to me. (In your mind, substitute Wolfe for Nabokov, and see what you think.)

"Nabokov's remarks on Gogol help to underscore this analogical definition of involution: "All reality is a mask," he writes (p.148), and Nabokov's narratives are masques, stagings of his own inventions rather than recreations of the naturalistic world. But, since the latter is what most readers expect and demand of fiction, many still do not understand what Nabokov is doing. They are not accustomed to "the allusions to something else behind the crudely painted screens"(p.142), where the "real plots behind the obvious ones are taking place." There are thus at least two "plots" in all of Nabokov's fiction: the characters in the book, and the consciousness of the creator above it - the "real plot" which is visible in the "gaps" and "holes" in the narrative....Although other writers have created involuted works, Nabokov's self-consciousness is supreme; and the range and scale of his effects, his mastery and control, make him unique."

There's much more.

I know that in my own experience, the second reading of any Wolfe work is almost radically different from the first. As if I were reading a  
\*different\* book. Nabokov is the only other author I've had this reaction to.

In The White Goddess, Graves mentions the connection between the elm and the vine of Dionysus - which, as Borski's pointed out, is what Dennis is short for.

---

Jesper Svedberg — 07 Jun 2007, 11:38 · in reply to JWillard

JWillard skrev:

Another influence, that I've never really seen anyone address, is Nabokov. Wolfe admits the influence, and Nabokov is a tricky, tricky man, and I believe Wolfe learned much from him.

While Wolfe has said that he has read Nabokov, I seem to remember that he also said that he first read him very late in his life (that is, after he found his own voice). I can't really seem to find a cite for this though, except this post: <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0025/0091.shtml> so perhaps someone knows more about it than I do.

// Jesper

---

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Jun 2007, 18:48 · in reply to JWillard

On 6/6/07, JWillard <aldenweer at charter.net> wrote:  
I think the mistake is to assume an allusion is just some sort of homage or a wink and a nod: I don't know if it's that simple.

Certainly not \*all\* are! I'm not inveighing against noting or interpreting allusions, only against the assumption that all allusions are equally significant.

I think it's quite possible that the Book of the New Sun is Wolfe playing with the Divine Comedy.

Wow. That's interesting, particularly if you revert to the original structure of a trilogy. Thecla as Beatrice? Jonas (or Talos) as Vergil? H'mmm.

In The White Goddess, Graves mentions the connection between the elm and the vine of Dionysus - which, as Borski's pointed out, is what Dennis is short for.

Yes. But then, he's mostly called "Den" (short for both "Alden" and "Dennis"), and that's where a wolf dwells...

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

-----

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

---

don doggett — 07 Jun 2007, 20:49 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Yes. But then, he's mostly called "Den" (short for both "Alden" and "Dennis"), and that's where a wolf dwells...

I haven't read Peace, but I was zipping through this letter and misread the bit above as "and that's where Wolfe dwells. . ." That is, the mutable space between meanings. It's obviously not what you said nor what

you meant but it seemed like a fortunate error, so I thought I'd share it.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

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

---

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 07 Jun 2007, 21:50 · in reply to don doggett

On 6/7/07, don doggett <kingwukong at yahoo.com> wrote:

Yes. But then, he's mostly called "Den" (short for both "Alden" and "Dennis"), and that's where a wolf dwells...

I haven't read Peace, but I was zipping through this letter and misread the bit above as "and that's where Wolfe dwells. . ."

Heh. I almost wrote "a Wolfe," and decided it would be kinda twee of me. (It isn't twee as a misreading, just doing it on purpose.)

That is, the mutable space between meanings. It's obviously not what you said nor what you meant but it seemed like a fortunate error, so I thought I'd share it.

And I'll second it.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

-----

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.