

Fifth Head debate, & Severi

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Tony Ellis — 09 Apr 1998, 15:23

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Fifth Head debate, & Severian's Mercy

Robert Borski wrote:

Any thoughts, Tony, as long as we're mentioning associative works, on why GW called Phaedria Phaedria, if not for the extraliterary reference to incest?

Well, my best shot would be the Phaedria in Spencer's The Faerie Queene, who personifies Wantonness. Not very fair on the poor girl, I know, but she is a bit of a flirt. Apparently there's also a Phaedria in the Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus's Pot of Gold, but I don't pretend to have read that.

Sadly, Robert, I think we've taken the current Fifth Head debate about as far as we can, as any further arguments I made now would just be reiterations of arguments I've already made. It's been fun.

Terry Nickolette asked:

When does [Severian] find his humanity?

I'm glad I'm not the only one who's been pondering this. I think Mantis is right that the moment in Baldanders' castle is a "benchmark", when Severian notes his own unease at the sight of the eviscerated woman, and observes that once this would not have disturbed him at all.

I don't think that his sparing of Cyracia is any sign of a growing sense of mercy, however. He is quite prepared to strangle her right up to the last moment, and only saves her to expiate the guilt he feels for not saving Thecla. In his own beautiful words "we strive to repay the debts of the past with the debased currency of the present."

It may be a mistake to look for a specific Road-to-Damascus moment when Severian changes, but here's a thought to play with: in Archetypal literary criticism one of the archetypes of character development and change is the Descent into the Underworld. The Underworld is the metaphorical dark underside of everyday reality, the place where the rules change, characterised by inversion. The protagonist enters it when he or she is at their lowest spiritual ebb, passes through a personal nadir, but then gains some sort of enlightenment and leaves the underworld on an upper path, a changed person. Marlowe's river journey in Heart of Darkness is often cited as an example, but I've always thought Bilbo's encounter with Gollum in The Hobbit was a good one too: he's literally in the underworld, and he's at his lowest ebb, having lost his friends and all hope of getting out. We have inversion in the form of the slimey, murderous Gollum, who is Bilbo's antithesis in every way. Before this encounter Bilbo was a useless, cowardly deadweight, after it, thanks to the talismanic Ring he carries out of the underworld, he is a hero and a better person.

My point: there is an episode between Cyracia and Baldanders' castle that fits all the characteristics of the Descent into the Underworld. It is the encounter with Typhon. Having just seen Little Severian fry, (which may be symbolic in itself: the death of his spiritually immature self?) Big Severian is at a personal all-time low. He is close to killing himself. Cue Typhon, who whisks Sev away into the dark interior of the mountain - the Underworld. We have inversion, too: when Typhon dangles Sev over the abyss he holds him by the ankles, literally turning his world upside down.

Behind this episode lies another story, of course: Christ's temptation by the Devil. That too is a Descent into the Underworld: Christ goes into the wilderness a carpenter's son, fasts, meets his own inverse in the Devil, and emerges ready to begin his ministry.

Just an idea to play with over Easter! Given his mistrust of academics, Wolfe would probably dismiss it out of hand... <g>