

New Wolfe Story at Subterranean Press

The Urth list — 19 messages, 9 voices, 26 Jun 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4866>

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Matthew Keeley — 26 Jun 2007, 16:26

Hi,

Subterraneanpress.com just posted a new Wolfe story. Should be an interesting read. Does anyone know if Wolfe plans to publish any books with Subterranean? It's a great small press, and I wouldn't mind seeing a Wolfe volume from them.

-Matt

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 26 Jun 2007, 17:49 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

Just read it. It looks like one of those stories Wolfe does occasionally that seem kind of pointless at first and come back to whack you later. This one hasn't come back to whack me yet, but I feel it in there trying to figure itself out.

On 6/26/07, Matthew Keeley <matthew.keeley.1 at gmail.com> wrote:

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Joel Sieh — 26 Jun 2007, 19:45 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Yeah, same here. It definitely has some dark undertones.

I get the following out of it so far (SPOILERS AHEAD):

- Robots are at the same time perfect (and more convenient), but not as good as the real thing.
- Real is messy, imperfect, inconvenient, and is being slowly exterminated for it.
- I think there's a contrast of impurity/purity implied there, too. Roberta teaches Julianne. Roberta is blond (pure), while Julianne is brunette (impure) (according to some folklore - not sure where I'm getting that, maybe pulpy werewolf stories).
- Roberta the robot girl pities Robber the robot dog, and through this we get to see her self pity. At the same time she pities him, she loves him. Maybe she loves him because he is like her, or because she empathizes with him. And maybe her understanding is why he loves her (as shown by his attempts to get back to her - I'd like to think it's because she understands and values

him, and not just because they're both robots).

- I think Julianne kills Rover the real dog.... At least that's what the narrator wants us to think, without coming out and saying it.

- Maybe the narrator does, but I don't think so. There's the repeated hedge imagery when Rover comes into his yard and when the dog dies, but I think it more likely that the narrator is some incarnation of death.... Or something. His talk at the beginning about the inevitability of death, his fascination with the girls, his attempt at proving the value of living things through his dog-swapping experiment, and his collection of the dead dog at the end lead me in that direction. As a side note, I thought "penetrated" was an odd word choice in the following sentence: "Roberta's puppy had penetrated the hedge that separates the Robinson's back yard from our own." With the screaming in the same paragraph, it could take on a violent or sinister quality like what Michael Swanwick says of "A Solar Labyrinth".

- A question that popped out at me while I was reading: Who is the "our" in the "our own" in the sentence quoted above?

- The narrator fixates on innocence. He mentions it when he talks about the girls and baby dogs/animals. There may be parallels between his relationships to the girls and their relationships to the dogs.

- Some other things I noticed: Both the narrator and Roberta tried to teach. Robots, children, and small animals share the quality of innocence, and the narrator definitely does not (or believes he does not).

Just a bunch of bits and pieces. That's what I often end up with at the end of a first reading of Gene Wolfe, however. Not quite enough to put it all together, yet. Maybe it'll help move the discussion along, though!

--Joel

On 6/26/07, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

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Matthew King — 26 Jun 2007, 21:12 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Jun 26, 2007, at 4:03 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

One bit-and-piece that got left out: Roberta and Robber both have "Rob" names. So do the Robinsons. Are they actually flesh&blood themselves?

The Robinsons are fleshly:

"Either the Robinsons could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a real child."

Matthew King — 26 Jun 2007, 21:13 · in reply to Joel Sieh

If I hadn't known the story was by Wolfe, this sentence would have revealed it: ?I'm going to pry, Roberta. I'm going to ask you about things that are none of my business. I hope you'll answer.

Secondly, in response to a few of Joel Sieh's observations:

- Roberta the robot girl pities Robber the robot dog, and through this we get to see her self pity. At the same time she pities him, she loves him. Maybe she loves him because he is like her, or because she empathizes with him. And maybe her understanding is why he loves her (as shown by his attempts to get back to her - I'd like to think it's because she understands and values him, and not just because they're both robots).

I think this exchange is important:

"Robber thinks he's a real dog. The words held a world of agony. ?Does he?"

?Yes! He's?he's a thing, but he thinks he's a real dog. She turned away and ran into her house.

So has the narrator caused Roberta to lose her innocence by leading her to "realize" that she is a thing, not a real girl? I use the scare quotes because Wolfe has consistently shown in his other work that one needn't be human to be people.

- I think Julianne kills Rover the real dog.... At least that's what the narrator wants us to think, without coming out and saying it.

- Maybe the narrator does, but I don't think so. There's the repeated hedge imagery when Rover comes into his yard and when the dog dies, but I think it more likely that the narrator is some incarnation of death.... Or something. His talk at the beginning about the inevitability of death, his fascination with the girls, his attempt at proving the value of living things through his dog-swapping experiment, and his collection of the dead dog at the end lead me in that direction.

I don't believe the dog was dead. The narrator guessed that Rover had followed Julianne home, and when he went there, he "found Rover lying quietly" under Julianne's bedroom window. Rover was pining for Julianne, not for the fjords.

The surface story (Roy Lackey's term) seems simple on this point of unrequited love. Robot dog loves robot girl, and flesh dog loves flesh girl. One or both girls do not love their counterpart dogs in return.

Julianne tells the narrator that she likes the robot better because he "don't mess the carpet". If Julianne is not dissimulating, this supports the narrator's disgust for the sterile civilization.

Perhaps Roberta, in answer to my question above, refuses to love the robot dog so as to avoid hard thoughts about her own nature.

Roberta is wrong, though, in thinking that Robber is not a real dog. Were he just a thing, Julianne's family would not need to keep him chained up.

As a side note, I thought "penetrated" was an odd word choice in the following sentence: "Roberta's puppy had penetrated the hedge that separates the Robinson's back yard from our own." With the screaming in the same paragraph, it could take on a violent or sinister quality like what Michael Swanwick says of "A Solar Labyrinth".

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And why does the narrator give himself the role of the evil dwarf in his imagining of a fecund human past?

Joel Sieh — 26 Jun 2007, 21:35 · in reply to Matthew King

Roberta, Robber, Rover, and the Robinsons all have "Ro" names. Julianne is the only exception. I wonder if there's anything to that?

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On 6/26/07, Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:

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On Jun 26, 2007, at 4:35 PM, Joel Sieh wrote:

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Perhaps we are supposed to use this pattern to determine the name of the narrator.

Joel Sieh — 26 Jun 2007, 21:55 · in reply to Joel Sieh

And one more note on names: Julianne says her father the chef gave her her name. I'm guessing it's a pun on julienne. "Juliencing is a method of food preparation in which the food item is cut into long thin strips" (source Wikipedia - Juliencing). Sounds ominous to me!

Another sinister association: Back in that paragraph I mentioned:

"First I seized an opportunity to speak to the girls together. Roberta's puppy had penetrated the hedge that separates the Robinson's back yard from our own. Both girls screamed, jumped up and down, and did little else. I quieted them, assured them that I would capture their small fugitive, and did so by tempting him with scraps of meat."

The more I look at the paragraph, the worse it looks: seized, penetrated, screamed, capture, tempting him with scraps of meat. Maybe I'm jumping at shadows here, but it all seems very dark. It seems nonsensical that the scraps of meat could be from "Julienne," but it's another strange connection.

--Joel

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"Either the Robinsons could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a real child."

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 26 Jun 2007, 22:01 · in reply to Matthew King

On 6/26/07, Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:

If I hadn't known the story was by Wolfe, this sentence would have revealed it:

"I'm going to pry, Roberta. I'm going to ask you about things that are none of my business. I hope you'll answer."

Yeah ... that sounds like it could come right out of Silk's mouth, doesn't it?

So has the narrator caused Roberta to lose her innocence by leading her to "realize" that she is a thing, not a real girl? I use the scare quotes because Wolfe has consistently shown in his other work that one needn't be human to be people.

What we have here appears at first glance to be a variation on the Pinocchio/Astro Boy problem: the robot who wants to be a "real boy," or, in this case, girl. Roberta is, as you say, "people," and at the story's beginning it has not even occurred to her that she might not be.

This tells us a few things (in the manner of science fiction) about the culture in which she lives, the most important of which is that most people in this culture accept robots as "people." She has been going to school and does not appear to have been in any way singled out or mistreated for her "different"-ness; she plays with flesh children with nobody thinking anything bad or odd about it.

This is key. Robots are **totally** integrated into this human society.

Yet our narrator has a problem with that. He seems to function in the society, but he hates it, hates what he perceives as its neat, orderly, artificial nature, and especially its sterility.

Our gently curving streets offended me. Our neatly finished green lawns, more than half of them of artificial grass, offended me still more. I hated every house I saw; their fresh paint and absurd mixture of styles were more than sufficient to account for any amount of hatred.

Yet I had another, better, reason. I hated then because there was scarcely one that housed two children, and that most housed none.

Like my own.

The first question to pose here: Is his society really this sterile, or is he projecting his own sterility onto it? The three words that convey his own childlessness get a paragraph to themselves. They are important to him.

This leads to a second: Is he human? If robots this integrated into society, he might not think to mention it; yet, if he feels the way he seems to, one would hardly think he would fail to mention it.

(Incidentally, why are we all saying "he" and "him"? Is the narrator's gender ever mentioned?)

And the next paragraphs feed on this ambiguity:

My kind had built a paradise, of which I was a part. A paradise for machines, in which the human race, though welcome, could not and did not thrive. In and around the filthy huts of the medieval peasants, children ran and shouted, laughed and wept, and no doubt received sturdy buffets when they made too much noise. There the family sang around a table we would scorn. There grandmothers recounted wild tales before the fire, tales full of bold boys who made good and honest country maidens who tricked evil dwarves like me.

Tales that were full of life because the children were, and full of death, too, because each child had to learn that death is life's shadow.

Here? But I have gone on too long already.

How very odd: the narrator speaks of "my kind," but as far as these paragraphs suggest, the narrator's "kind" could as easily be the machines as the humans.

I am reminded a bit of Isaac Asimov's story, "Segregationist," a story about a surgeon who is opposed to the practice of putting machine parts into human bodies. The "shock ending" reveals that the surgeon is, himself, a robot (a fact important in the context of Asimov's robot stories, in which robots very much reflected the position of Blacks in mid-20th-century America).

Children full of life, and full of death: where is this going? And what did the narrator stop him/herself from saying?

I don't believe the dog was dead.

Nor do I. The narrator picks "him," not "it" up, and carries "him" home. In a story that focuses (in part) on the relation between the living and the non-living the choice of pronoun matters.

- A question that popped out at me while I was reading: Who is the "our" in the "our own" in the sentence quoted above?

An excellent question. The narrator does not at any other point mention any companions -- unless it is the "we" who would "scorn" the medieval peasants' tables.

And why does the narrator give himself the role of the evil dwarf in his imagining of a fecund human past?

Because he has contributed to the corruption of an "honest country maiden," perhaps. And perhaps, like Rumpelstiltskin, all would be resolved if we could guess his name. (Pleased to meet you ...)

We are clearly intended to set up parallels and oppositions between the girls and the pups, leading to questions about Julianne's parents(!), and about how all four relate to the narrator. I find this detail telling. The narrator says that Rover was

innocent as are the young of almost every animal, and friendly as are the young of a very few.

The word "animal" takes on additional resonances if we try on the position that the narrator is a robot, does it not?

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 — 26 Jun 2007, 23:29 · in reply to Matthew King

On Tuesday 26 June 2007 17:13, Matthew King wrote:

"our" in the "our own" in the sentence quoted above?

And why does the narrator give himself the role of the evil dwarf in his imagining of a fecund human past?

The one that popped out at me is whether the narrator is robot or human. Has he, perhaps, managed to infect Roberta with his own disgust at his own nature?

"...Either the Robinsons could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a real child. I could not? I do not blame them in the least. But I wondered, because I have never had much to do with such "bots, about her schooling..." What's the significance of the word "such" in that sentence? Has he, perhaps, had "much to do" with other types of 'bots?

"My kind had built a paradise, of which I was a part. A paradise for machines, in which the human race, though welcome, could not and did not thrive..." What is his kind? Did machines build the paradise? Is he part of the paradise for machines because he's a machine himself? When he speaks of the human race not thriving, is he speaking as a member of that race - or as an observer outside the race?

Why is Roberta, the robot girl, the center of the story rather than Julianne, the human girl? Early in the story, he says "...poor simple little beings whose torment I began...." Who's he referring to here? The two girls? Or the two robots, one in human form, one in canine?

Matthew King — 27 Jun 2007, 01:16 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Jun 26, 2007, at 5:01 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

If I hadn't known the story was by Wolfe, this sentence would have revealed it:

"I'm going to pry, Roberta. I'm going to ask you about things that are none of my business. I hope you'll answer."

Yeah ... that sounds like it could come right out of Silk's mouth, doesn't it?

Or Able, or the father from "Ziggurat", or Latro on his better days. If I'm remembering rightly, the protagonist of Memorare also spoke like that.

don doggett — 27 Jun 2007, 04:05 · in reply to Matthew King

--- Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:

The Robinsons are fleshly:

"Either the Robinsons could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a

real child."

Not necessarily. Wolfe's best trick is to make us make assumptions. The only statement of fact in the sentence is that the Robinsons don't have "real" children. It's suspiciously vague in the face of this Ro- pattern of the names. Even undertaking the travail and expense of a real child has no concrete meaning. Birthing a child? Procuring a child? Cloning one? All of these could be an expensive ordeal.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

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

don doggett — 27 Jun 2007, 04:15 · in reply to Matthew King

--- Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:

And why does the narrator give himself the role of the evil dwarf in his imagining of a fecund human past?

Maybe this is reaching on my part, but Herman Hesse wrote a story about a hideous dwarf who belonged to a princess. He's given a puppy that he loves more than anything, but the princess' jackass husband drowns it. So the dwarf gets revenge by poisoning the prince and himself, leaving the princess alone iirc. What this might have to do with the story, I'm not sure. It also seems to have reflections of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? where everyone is a replicant, but not everyone knows it.

Don

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don doggett — 27 Jun 2007, 05:34 · in reply to don doggett

Okay,

I may crash and burn with this, but be darned if I'm not going to try to fly.

First. You don't cook a salad. You prepare it. And if you're a cook rather than a chef, you don't specialise in salads. And the money won't be that great.

This is from the Word Detective (google that and "cook"):

{Our everyday "prepare food" verb "to cook" first appeared in the 14th century and is derived from the much older noun form, which comes from the Latin "coquus," which also gave us "concoct." As might be expected from an activity so central to human life, "to cook" has spawned a variety of slang and colloquial senses over the years, including "to ruin" and, alternatively, "to do very well" (as in "to cook with gas"). "To cook" meaning "to falsify, tamper with, present in a secretly altered form" is actually one of the oldest slang senses of the verb, dating all the way back to at least the early 17th century, and is directly drawn from the "prepare carefully" sense of "cook."}

Okay, so what is salad? Well a salad, in addition to being a food, can also simply mean a "variety of things". BUT. . . another word for salad is sallet, which is also a helmet with eyeslits from the middle ages.

So, I think that Julianne's dad is some sort of biomechanical engineer that specializes in sallets: brain pans and such. And Julianne is literally made from strips of meat. Either a clone or a Jonas type hybrid. But she's as artificial as Roberta.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

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

Mo Holkar / UKG — 27 Jun 2007, 09:28 · in reply to don doggett

At 05:15 27/06/2007, Don wrote:

Maybe this is reaching on my part, but Herman Hesse wrote a story about a hideous dwarf who belonged to a princess. He's given a puppy that he loves more than anything, but the princess' jackass husband drowns it.

A more familiar reference might be to Rumpelstiltskin, who spins straw into gold for the miller's daughter in exchange for (he hopes) her first-born child.

I'm also picking up references to Don Juan -- the great hand which drags people down to Hell, and the quotation from Byron about his dog?

The epigraph is from Shakespeare's 144th sonnet:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:

The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil,
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turned fiend,
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell:
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

although what to make of that, I don't know. Possibly also a reference to Lord Alfred Douglas's "Two Loves", one of which famously dare not speak its name?

I'm not sure why the narrator implores God to forgive him for taking Rover back to Roberta. Julianne has already said that she didn't want Rover, so it's not like he could have stayed there. Unless the narrator thinks that Julianne was lying about this? He's said that he was doubtful when Roberta said that both girls called the deal off.

Mo

Solomon, Joshua — 27 Jun 2007, 09:46 · follows Mo Holkar / UKG

Date: Tue, 26 Jun 2007 17:35:36 -0400
From: "Joel Sieh" <joel.sieh at gmail.com>

Roberta, Robber, Rover, and the Robinsons all have "Ro" names. Julianne is the only exception. I wonder if there's anything to that?

Yeah. I'm pretty sure we're supposed to think about Shakespeare's Romeo. And Julianne is like Juliet.

Date: Tue, 26 Jun 2007 15:01:08 -0700
From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com>

I am reminded a bit of Isaac Asimov's story, "Segregationist," a story about a surgeon who is opposed to the practice of putting machine parts into human bodies. The "shock ending" reveals that the surgeon is, himself, a robot (a fact important in the context of Asimov's robot stories, in which robots very much reflected the position of Blacks in mid-20th-century America).

Me too. Again, I think we are supposed to draw a parallel between racial segregation and robot/human segregation. Note the exchange "What do you get if you mix black and white?" "Grey if you mean paint. Brown if you mean people."

bee

Joshua A. Solomon
<http://www.staff.city.ac.uk/~solomon>

Nigel Price — 27 Jun 2007, 09:56 · follows Solomon, Joshua

I think it's a really good short short-story. As already pointed out, there seems to be a distinct possibility that the narrator is him-, her- or itself a robot. The situation on "his" world is

paradoxical. It is sterile because humans have opted for the mechanical rather than the biological, but introducing segregation between humans and machines turns out not to be the answer to solving the problem. It introduces pain and sorrow without solving the preference. This seems to be in part because the dogs retain a natural preference for their own kind which humans have lost. The girls, in contrast, prefer their opposites. The robot girl is made miserable by the way the robot dog shows her her own lack of humanness while the human girl and her family are burdened by the biological inconveniences of a real dog.

It's a sad little tale, but brilliantly told and full of unexplainedly sinister notes and references. The narrator has from the start a slightly devilish quality that isn't quite substantiated by the apparent facts of the story. He begins with references to devils hauling sinners off to hell and acts and speaks throughout like a stalker or a paedophile, though nothing that he does actually justifies this impression. He's interfering and unwise, that's all. But maybe that's enough, and maybe that's the - or a - point of the story. If you're miserable and dissatisfied, it's easy to spread your unhappiness to others. The narrator lives, by his own description, in a machine paradise and he's the snake in the garden introducing machine unhappiness.

Maybe he really is a robot Satan, or at least a robot Satan analogue?

Nigel

Joel Sieh — 28 Jun 2007, 15:14 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On 6/26/07, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Children full of life, and full of death: where is this going? And what did the narrator stop him/herself from saying?

I just looked back at this part. My best guess is that he stops himself from further contrasting the current time with the past. He begins the sentence with "Here," which I figure means, "Here, now." I'll take a stab at finishing the sentence: "Here, life and death are both shunned, as they are unnecessary burdens on a culture too perfect to allow either."

I don't believe the dog was dead.

Nor do I. The narrator picks "him," not "it" up, and carries "him" home. In a story that focuses (in part) on the relation between the living and the non-living the choice of pronoun matters.

Yeah, I think I misread this part. My misread might point out an ambiguity that can allow a different reading, however. I'm not really going to pursue the alternate reading here, but I want to explain why I came to my original conclusion, and why the ambiguity might exist.

Here's the relevant part of the story:

"I got Julianne's address from Roberta, drove over there, and found Rover lying quietly by the side of the house, half hidden by shrubbery, under a window that I would guess was that of Julianne's bedroom.

God forgive me! I picked him up and carried him home."

The part that first made me jump to my dead dog conclusion was "lying quietly by the side of the house, half hidden by shrubbery." It seemed odd to me that the dog would be half hidden by the shrubbery, unless he was dead. He would either be "hiding in the shrubbery," or the shrubbery would not be mentioned. "Lying quietly by the side of the house" made him look like a discarded thing, and is similar to a dog "lying quietly by the side of the road," which anyone

could read as a dead dog. The "God forgive me!" line reinforced this, because carrying a dead dog home would be jarring to the family, and could seem callous, and ... odd. Lastly, Rover was not mentioned again after this paragraph.

Of course, there are clearly other valid reasons why this idea is wrong. However, I found it fun to think about.

--Joel

P. S. -- I think that the list has figured most of this story out. I've enjoyed the interpretations I've seen presented.