

Slow Children at Play

The Urth list — 6 messages, 3 voices, 12 Sep 2007

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JBarach at aol.com — 12 Sep 2007, 16:54

Urthers --

Have we discussed "Slow Children at Play" on this list? I looked in the archives and couldn't find anything, but perhaps I missed it. There are SPOILERS in what follows.

SPOILER ALERT

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It seems to me that Mark may be an angel ("I c-came from the sky ... Yes! F-from the sky! I f-fell, oh, f-fell so many, many. I h-had wings"). As that quotation indicates, he would be a fallen angel, though he doesn't appear to be evil here.

But if Mark is an angel and Gene is a man, what exactly is Joe (Mark says "I c-came from the sky ... J-Joe out of the ground"). Is he in some sense an animal?

The light turns out to be a fire with a man standing in front of it ("in it," Gene says, the way we speak of "the Man in the Moon"). But when the man turns, he reveals, "not his back, but an entire new being: a live griffin, eagle-clawed and many-winged." Furthermore, "that figure was horned like a Viking or a devil; and as I looked, it roared like a lion."

The description sounds terrifying. But what is a griffin? A griffin is a GOOD creature in mythology, and as Borges points out, was seen as a symbol of Jesus Christ because it had two natures. It was both a lion and an eagle. This particular griffin isn't just a griffin, though. It also has the face of a man and horns like a Viking or a devil ... or an OX (and of course an ox is where a Viking got his horns).

What has characteristics of an ox, a lion, an eagle, and a man? A cherub.

In the Bible, cherubim (the plural of "cherub") aren't chubby babies. They are the creatures that were fashioned on top of the ark of the covenant, which is God's footstool. God is described as enthroned above the cherubim.

And when Ezekiel sees God, the creatures he is enthroned above are cherubim.

Each of them have four faces: "As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right side; each of the four had the face of an ox on the left side; and each of the four had the face of an eagle" (Ezek. 1:10).

It seems to me, then, that the creature Gene sees is a cherub. (He's also remarkably like a sphinx in some ways, but then sphinxes seem to me to combine the same sorts of animals that

cherubim do.) Now factor in that the cherub "still stood like a sentry before its fire, which appeared to revolve majestically now, grown even larger and more brilliant."

Isn't this pretty much straight from Genesis 3:24, where God drives Adam and Eve from the Garden, "and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life"? Here, as in "Slow Children at Play," we have cherubim standing guard and we have a flame that "turned every way" ("revolved" is a possible translation of the Hebrew).

Joe later tells Gene that Mark plays and that he plays and that last night Gene played with them. I don't know exactly what that means, but I wonder about any connection between it and Eden.

The cherubim tells the three that he will bring them again to the sun, but that it will not be for Gene's sake and certainly not for Mark's (and he looks disdainfully at Mark, which again suggests to me that he may be a fallen angel), and not even for Joe's (and he speaks to Joe "more kindly," which again suggests to me that Joe isn't human or angelic and may therefore be ... an animal?). It appears to me that Joe and Mark get to enter the Garden and play, but Gene, seeing the cherubim's other faces, flees. He is not (yet) allowed to enter into the Garden. You have to become like a little child in order to enter the kingdom, Jesus says.

And what's the significance of the poem at the end? What's the source, too?
It appears to indicate that we are to read the story, not as a horror story (though that's how Gene, the narrator, tells it, because for him it is horrific and he thinks he's had a psychotic episode), but as something good and peaceful. The play of the "slow children" is part of the cosmic dance and is a good thing.

One more comment: What's particularly fascinating about this story is the link between it and "The Arimaspians' Legacy." The house in which Gene, Joe, and Mark live seems at first to be in our world, but it's a city in which everything to the south is in ruins AND it's the same house in which David Arimaspians stepped through a window to his death, as Gene tells us.

There's a load of stuff hidden in the next line: "And so I remained where I was, studying, or rather, pretending to study, G. T. Griffith's Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World; though when I thought of David, the nominal 'best friend' of my childhood, the author's name became anathema to me and I covered it (for it appeared at the top of the page) with one hand."

Thinking about David makes the name of G. T. Griffith anathema to Gene.
Why? Perhaps because Griffith had something to do with David's death? Is it possible that "G. T. Griffith" actually is Gene himself, and that he had something to do with the death of his "nominal" (N.B.!) "best friend"? Or what?

Anyway, I throw this out for your consideration. Nutria, if you're still on the list, I could use your insights, in particular.

John

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John Barach (541) 531-2906
Pastor, Reformation Covenant Church (CREC)
706 Beekman Avenue

Medford, OR 97501

[_http://barach.us_](http://barach.us) (<http://barach.us>)

[_http://rccso.com_](http://rccso.com) (<http://rccso.com>)

JBarach at aol.com — 12 Sep 2007, 17:15 · follows JBarach at aol.com

In a message dated 9/12/2007 9:56:15 A.M. Pacific Daylight Time, JBarach at aol.com writes:

The cherubim tells the three that he will bring them again to the sun, but that it will not be for Gene's sake and certainly not for Mark's (and he looks disdainfully at Mark, which again suggests to me that he may be a fallen angel), and not even for Joe's (and he speaks to Joe "more kindly," which again suggests to me that Joe isn't human or angelic and may therefore be ... an animal?). It appears to me that Joe and Mark get to enter the Garden and play, but Gene, seeing the cherubim's other faces, flees. He is not (yet) allowed to enter into the Garden. You have to become like a little child in order to enter the kingdom, Jesus says.

In this connection, I should also point out that the narrator, Gene, is reminded of the three Magi following a star and coming to Christ, which (I should think) is a pretty good hint about the meaning of their quest.

Note, too, that Joe's attempt to dive through the window (i.e., commit suicide) is an attempt to reach Paradise, but that it's not the right way, and so Mark rescues him.

It's interesting to me, too, to see how Wolfe has grouped the stories in *Innocents Aboard*. Like "Slow Children at Play," "The Old Woman Whose Rolling Pin Is the Sun" is also about the winter solstice, the darkest time of the year.

And like "The Friendship Light," "Slow Children at Play" was, according to Wolfe's Introduction, "based in part on an actual light -- a mysterious light, in this case -- which I saw once and have never seen again." It sounds from that statement that both of them were based in part on the same light. At any rate, they have the light theme in common, except that in "The Friendship Light" the light's flickering seems to attract demons and results in evil, whereas the beacon in "Slow Children" draws men, angels, and ... whatever Joe is, in a way that is intended to be good (though not understood as such by Gene).

John

%%%%%%%%%

John Barach (541) 531-2906

Pastor, Reformation Covenant Church (CREC)

706 Beekman Avenue

Medford, OR 97501

[_http://barach.us_](http://barach.us) (<http://barach.us/>)

[_http://rccso.com_](http://rccso.com) (<http://rccso.com/>)

Roy C. Lackey — 13 Sep 2007, 23:45 · follows JBarach at aol.com

John Barach wrote:

But if Mark is an angel and Gene is a man, what exactly is Joe (Mark says

"I

c-came from the sky ... J-Joe out of the ground"). Is he in some sense an

animal?

I don't think so. I believe Joe is a man, which is why he looked to Gene for confirmation that they would both eventually die. Joe came "out of the ground" only in the sense that Adam did. That's the why of the "Dust to dust" comment made by Gene.

Keep in mind that Wolfe **never** retells a story the same way he first heard it. The Eden story seems to be mixed up here with the Christmas story. Mark may well be a fallen angel, but he is a lesser angel than Lucifer.

It seems to me, then, that the creature Gene sees is a cherub. (He's also remarkably like a sphinx in some ways, but then sphinxes seem to me to combine the same sorts of animals that cherubim do.) Now factor in that the cherub "still stood like a sentry before its fire, which appeared to revolve majestically now, grown even larger and more brilliant."

I don't pretend to understand what point Wolfe intended to make with this story. Like you, I can see the creature before the fire as an angel somehow concerned with the imminent anniversary of the birth of Christ; and Mark, Gene and Joe as latter-day Magi. But the red flames and the comparison of the horned figure to a Viking or a devil say something else. Or so I see it.

-Roy

Matthew Groves — 14 Sep 2007, 04:08 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Thanks to John for the thoughtful post on Slow Children at Play. Maybe you could post some of this interpretation on the WolfeWiki.

I think I may have the answer to one of your questions, or rather, you have the answer yourself. There are two possibilities as to why Gene covers the name G. T. Griffith (who is a real author). The more probable answer is that "Griffith" reminds Gene of "griffin," and, as we learn in "The Arimaspians Legacy," he has dreams of griffins chasing after David. The less probable answer (though one does not exclude the other) is that "Griffith" is David's real last name. (In "The Arimaspians Legacy," we learn that although "David" is the narrator's friend's name, "Arimaspian" is not.)

The quote at the end is about angels. The source, De Mundo, is probably some theological manuscript that Wolfe would know.

But the story is definitely (but not only) a horror story. Reminds me of Poe a little.

JBarach at aol.com — 14 Sep 2007, 04:46 · follows Matthew Groves

In a message dated 9/13/2007 9:08:53 P.M. Pacific Daylight Time, matthewalangroves at gmail.com writes:

I think I may have the answer to one of your questions, or rather, you have the answer yourself. There are two possibilities as to why Gene covers the name G. T. Griffith (who is a real author). The more probable answer is that "Griffith" reminds Gene of "griffin," and, as we learn in "The Arimaspians Legacy," he has dreams of griffins chasing after David. The less probable answer (though one does not exclude the other) is that "Griffith" is David's real last name. (In "The Arimaspians Legacy," we learn that although "David" is the narrator's friend's name,

"Arimasbian" is not.)

What's really funny is that when I thought of "The Arimasbian Legacy," I really had "The Haunted Boardinghouse" in mind. Isn't there a boy that goes through a window in that one, too? No wonder I didn't make the right connections.

Yes, David in "The Arimasbian Legacy" is pursued by griffins. Griffith reminds Gene of griffins, and that's why he covers up the name. I'm pretty sure that's correct. (Funny, too: I thought of looking up the book by G. T. Griffith, but I didn't. If I had, I would have discovered that he's a real author).

So David is pursued by griffins and then Gene runs into a griffin/cherub at the gate of Paradise, where the revolving flame is (Gen. 3). Interesting. But in "The Arimasbian Legacy," we're told that an "Arimasbian" is a one-eyed thief who is out to steal the gold that the griffin guards, which is the sun and nuclear fission. In "Slow Children," the griffin-man (cherub) tells the three who come seeking that the fire is indeed the sun.

More thought is needed....

John

JBarach at aol.com — 14 Sep 2007, 04:49 · follows JBarach at aol.com

In a message dated 9/13/2007 9:08:53 P.M. Pacific Daylight Time, matthewalangroves at gmail.com writes:

But the story is definitely (but not only) a horror story. Reminds me of Poe a little.

Yes ... but it's a horror story *from the point of view of the narrator*. I'm not sure his point of view is correct. His point of view isn't, for instance, the point of view of the "slow children" who are playing. Is it possible that we are to see them as correct in their child-likeness and the scholar Gene to be incorrect in his "adult"-ness, so that what strikes them as play strikes him as horror and so that the griffin appears gracious to them, giving what they don't deserve, but that, in spite of his graciousness, his appearance terrifies Gene?

Why is Gene so afraid of griffins that he covers the name Griffith because it's too close to "griffin"?

John