The Cat

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 15 Apr 1998

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William H. Ansley — 15 Apr 1998, 01:16

I have a question about Gene Wolfe's story "The Cat," the sixteenth story (starting on p. 210 in the mass market paperback edition) in Wolfe's 1989 collection _Endangered Species_.

Since this story is obviously set in the same universe as TBotNS, it seems that it should provide more insight into that universe, but (to me at least) it does not. I have read the story several times, twice just before sending this posting, and I still have no idea what is supposed to be happening at the end of it.

A very brief summary of my interpretation of the story follows:

The story takes place in the fifth year of Severian's reign. It is told by Odilo the Steward who is in charge of maintaining the Hypogeum Apotropaic, Father Inire's residence in the House Absolute. Inire befriends Chatelaine Sancha, a lovely young girl of seven or eight, and shows her his circle of magic mirrors that can teleport a being to or from any point in the universe. She, thinking it is a toy, tosses her cat into the circle. The cat disappears. Inire promises to do what he can to get the cat back. At some point in time not too long after this, it becomes known that Sancha is attended by a "phantom cat." Years later, because of a scandal probably engineered by Chatelaine Leocadia, Sancha leaves the House Absolute. She stays away for 50 years. When she returns to the House Absolute, Sancha is allowed to stay in the Hypogeum Apotropaic because of her friendship with Inire. When Sancha dies, apparently of old age, a dark paw print appears on her counterpane and beside it is what appears to be a doll. It is the length of a hand and seems to be a perfect scale replica of a lovely, pubescent girl, apparently made of flesh and blood, though lifeless. It is interred with Sancha, on Inire's instructions. When the paw print cannot be removed from the counterpane, Odilo has it sent to the residence of Leocadia, whose sight is failing. Leocadia goes blind but sees the cat stalking her in her dreams.

The last sentence of the story is:

"It is not well for those of high station to involve the servants of their enemies in their quarrels."

I think I must be missing something very basic in this story, because I just don't get it.

I am assuming that something Father Inire does in his attempts to retrieve the cat cause it to come back as a phantom cat, that this isn't just a result of the cat being teleported by the mirrors. And I am assuming that the phantom cat is Sancha's cat, somehow returned in (mostly) immaterial form.

But what is the "doll" supposed to be? Why did it appear and where did it come from? Did Sancha's death cause its appearance or occur because of it? Were Leocadia's visions of a cat revenge for Sancha's banishment? If so, why did it only occur after Odilo sent the counterpane to her residence? Do the servants referred to in the last sentence of the story refer to Odilo, Inire, both or neither?

If anyone has any insights into this story, I'd really appreciate hearing them.

Thank you,
William Ansley

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m.driussi — 16 Apr 1998, 00:07 · follows William H. Ansley

Reply: Item #4094777 from URTH at LISTS.BEST.COM@INET02#

William H. Ansley,

Hello and welcome!

Yes, "The Cat" is a part of the Urth Cycle. And it is a puzzling tale. Personally I think it has two main points which it adds to the whole of our reading of the Urth Cycle:

(1) the (revelation of the) name of the Old Autarch of TBOTNS (this point will of course be violently argued against by the "Catherine is Autarch" league, the "Unknowable and Unnameable Old Autarch" faction, and others of that ilk).

(2) the nature of magic mirrors, most specifically (in a vague and mystery shrouded way): what comes back from a trip through magic mirrors. I don't think that many people will argue against the opinion that the creature which Father Inire retrieves is a very changed creature from the common house cat thrown into the mirrors, but I'm probably mistaken.

In addition to these main points, we also get (as you have yourself shown) some wonderful historical dates and events to add to the timeline of posthistory around the time of Severian's early reign and the decades before.

I agree with you that the "phantom cat" is the thing returned from the mirrors. I believe that the "doll" is a vessel built for it to dwell within: the analogy depends upon how you perceive the Miles/Jonas paradox.

If "Miles" is the "repaired Jonas" (and therefore the "other spirit" in that crowded body is the spirit of the biological prosthetics that Jonas took with him into the mirrors) who has returned to Urth as he promised he would (in order to search for Jolenta), then the Doll is (perhaps) the "repaired Cat" who got its heart's desire (meow-meow) in the Land Where Wishes Come True (assuming that a beloved Cat would wish to become like the beloved Cat Owner);

if "Miles" is just an innocent deadman who becomes the vessel for the disembodied spirit of Jonas, drawn down by the Claw (hey, cats have claws, too!), then the Doll is (maybe) an artifact (homunculus or miniature khaibit) which is ridden by the disembodied spirit of the Cat. In short, a spirit-mount, such as we see so often in THE BOOK OF THE LONG SUN.

In this second case, it might be that: the Doll is life-bound to the Woman, the Cat is spirit-bound to the Doll and still loves the Woman; thus when the Woman dies, the Doll dies and the Cat becomes "pure ghost" again.

In turn, this relates (or so it seems to me) to how we comprehend "The Tale of the Student and His Son"--since here is a case of a magician forming a hero out of concentrated thought. Eidolon, aquastor, homunculus?

All in all, I persist in thinking "The Cat" shows that mirror teleportation is in no way as simple as "beaming up" on Star Trek <tm>, but as to what actually happens remains obscure.

(Then again, I was shocked to discover that aquastors and eidolons are "real ghosts" rather than technological ghost-like things. Blind-sided again!)

=mantis=

Mark Millman — 16 Apr 1998, 14:54 · follows m.driussi

> On Wednesday 15 April 1998 at 20:07:00 mantis (m.driussi at genie.geis.com) wrote:
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> . . .
>
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I just re-read BotNS (in preparation for the lamentably lost Disclave discussion) and I've come to think that there is no difference (_pace_ mantis) between eidolons and aquastors. Well, that's not precisely true, so allow me to qualify: the physical manifestations that Severian sees, and for that matter, that Gunnie and Apheta see, are produced by the identical machine in an identical fashion from identical materials. (The aquastor Malrubius speaks of this machine, if you'll recall, when Severian is returned to the seaside below Gyoll in _Citadel_, saying it has a range of only a few thousand years.) The distinction between a common eidolon and the aquastors, I think, is that the aquastors are given a special office (cf. mantis' earlier post linking "aquastor" to Latin _quaesitor_ and the position it indicates) and, almost certainly, special programming and knowledge in addition to that which comes automatically as a result of Severian's memories of their models. Notice that the letter stolen from Severian on the ship Tzadkiel was given to him by "the aquastors for Urth"--that "for" is significant. It suggests that their post is an appointed one. While it might equally well be argued that they are the aquastors for Urth because they were created as specialized, single-purpose instruments for the job, the fact that Wolfe describes their dissolution in terms almost identical to those he uses for the disappearance of the eidolons after the fight in the Hall of Justice on Yesod, and the time that he has Severian refer to Malrubius and Triskele as eidolons (I'm sorry; the book's not with me, so I can't provide a page reference, but I'm pretty sure it's in _Urth_) impose the view that any modifications they may have undergone are minor compared to their similarities with other eidolons.

This in turn resolves the question of whether, when Severian is resurrected on the ship Tzadkiel, he is brought back as an eidolon or as an aquastor. They're the same thing, so the significant differences between his resurrection and the creation of the other eidolons are simply that he is not allowed to disperse, thus giving him time to anchor himself in the world by breathing, eating, etc., and that he is made not from a single person's recollection of him, but from the totality of his own memories of himself, since his brain is available for complete download. (This last point, by the way, echoes something that Wolfe says in "The Other Dead Man". In that story, the protagonist observes that Hap, after his revival by the medical unit, seems to be

more like the computer's idea of what Hap should be, rather than what the man himself, his friend, was like. Later, after the protagonist's own revival, he notices that he seems to behave in some cases almost without volition--I submit it's because those particular acts were conditioned by the computer's expectations of him, rather than by his own "natural" impulses to action.)

The visions and dreams that Severian has, in which he sees Malrubius and Triskele, are perhaps responsible for clouding the issue of the distinction between eidolons and aquastors. I see those episodes as being analogous to communications from Erebus or Abaia, sendings from minds (or mechanical equivalents, as on the Whorl, though this is not necessarily the case; possibly Tzadkiel's mind approaches the power of the others' minds, though he is doubtless more discreet in its use) vastly more powerful than human ones that have little or no objectively verifiable manifestation in the material world. The eidolons are, of course, fully material while being maintained, and can leave footprints in the sand and cuts and bruises on Severian and Gunnie.

Thus, mantis, your answer is "eidolon". But, like Severian, this eidolon has the opportunity to cement his place in the world by breathing and eating.

Mark Millman

A post script: I'd like to address the nature of homunculi too, but I don't think that Wolfe tells us enough about them for me to do so; I'll therefore restrict myself to a few comments. All of Baldanders' work that we hear about is performed on human victims, and I believe the suggestion is that he is rooted in a scientific materialism, indicating that Talos is probably built from parts (though not necessarily ones stolen from living creatures; perhaps he's a pre-fabricated servant) and then animated. Wolfe's descriptions of his face, like that of a stuffed fox, and the immobility of his features that forces him to use the attitude of his head and the placement of the shadows on his face to convey emotion and other non-verbal cues, tend to support this interpretation, as does his scant appetite.

MM

Sara Dann — 16 Apr 1998, 15:58 · follows Mark Millman

I know that this has probably been brought up before, but just to
satisfy my curiosity, how many here have read "The Book of Imaginary Beings" by Borges? I ask this is see if anyone else can see the connections between "Fauna of the Mirrors" and the short story "The Cat".
Xury