

Long Review Essay on Wizard Knight

The Urth list — 49 messages, 18 voices, 18 Sep 2007

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Stephen Frug — 18 Sep 2007, 17:45

Greetings Urthlings. I've read this message list before, but never posted to it. (Unless this message is itself a duplicate... the first time seems to have gotten lost...) But I just wrote a long review of Wizard Knight which I posted to my blog (<http://stephenfrug.blogspot.com>), and I thought that readers here would be interested in it -- and I am definitely interested in responses -- so I am cross-posting it. Hope that's okay. If my links & block-quote formatting don't come through, you can go to the blog-version to get them.

I just finished reading Gene Wolfe's two-volume novel, The Wizard Knight, made up of The Knight (2004) and The Wizard (2005). The following is a long essay reviewing (in some sense) the work, focusing on what I found problematic about it, rather than the (quite considerable number of things) I liked in it. This review-essay will have spoilers -- not major ones, but existent ones -- for the entirety of the work. Now, I'm not spoiling, I don't think, any of the Big Secrets from the book -- certainly not from the second half, where the cluster. So, in my opinion, there's nothing here that would really "spoil" a first reading of the work if you haven't read it yet. But if you want to approach it with no knowledge whatsoever, you should stop reading here. (Oh, and I guess there are spoilers for The Lord of the Rings too.)

I think my most basic reaction is that it's good but not Wolfe's best -- not up there with The Book of the New Sun or The Fifth Head of Cerberus, say. That it's well written is not in doubt: it's by Wolfe, after all. But I had some problems with it -- some of which are probably in my head, some of which are in the work, and some of which are in the chemical mixture of the two.

It's hard to criticize Wolfe, though, because of his reputation as a trickster: if you present a negative opinion of anything the man writes, you instantly lay yourself open to the charge that you just didn't get it. And not infrequently the charge will be valid. But it won't always be valid: Wolfe is human, humans are imperfect, and even Shakespeare wrote some clunkers. And while a lot of aspects of Wolfe's fiction are far more complex than they appear even at third glance, other aspects are, finally, not: they are straightforward, despite the efforts of Wolfe's more serious fans (an overlapping but not identical group to Wolfe's more serious readers) to try and make them so.

And, for me at least, it's even more intimidating when the backs of the books are filled with breathless praise from some of my other favorite writers: Neil Gaiman! Kim Stanley Robinson! Everyone seems to agree that this is the very best book since Wolfe's last very best book, and you just have to love it!

Well, I didn't. I liked it, but also had some real problems with it. So at the risk of derision for missing the point, I'm going to begin with some straightforward critiques of a writer who (in John Clute's apt words) "has never in his life told a straightforward tale".

I think the first half of The Knight was slow. There were a number of places where, if the book

hadn't said Gene Wolfe on the cover, I would have given up. Partly this was because the book, while being slow, presented itself mostly as an adventure book: it was not slow in the good way that, say, Proust is. It was slow where it shouldn't have been. For me, at least, this lessened as I went along, and by the end of *The Knight* I was fully gripped, and stayed so through *The Wizard*.

In a related criticism, the book was unevenly paced. This is related, not identical, because I'm not just referring to the first half of volume one. The rest of volume one and the first two-thirds or so of volume two, while never (for me) dull, proceeded at a stately pace through the events of the tale -- leaving the ending to be told at breakneck speed and with more-than-usual abridgement. Parts of this are due to Wolfe's habit of telling the most serious parts of his stories by indirection -- but only, I think, parts.

Wolfe's uneven pacing is actually habitual for him -- there are traces of it in *The Book of the New Sun*, and it's a more serious problem in *The Book of the Long Sun*. And at this point I'm coming around to the belief that while this is partly due to careful authorial craft, it is also partly a failure of it: Wolfe simply gets too wrapped up in the early stages of some of his adventures and tells them at (at times) tedious length.

Wolfe, as has been frequently noted, writes puzzles, works which hint at stories and cosmology and theology which are only partly and obscurely visible on the surface. But he also writes (and clearly likes to write and, from what he's said of his reading tastes, likes) adventure stories which form the surface under which those puzzles move. And while Wolfe is a genius at writing puzzles, he is, I think, uneven at writing adventures. He likes it more than he's good at it. And I find that my favorite Wolfe works are often those where he doesn't try -- in his short stories, for instance, in which he is often simply doing something else.

There are a lot of interpretive puzzles in *The Wizard Knight*, as there are in all of Wolfe's work. Some of them I got the first time around. Others I didn't; still others I probably even missed the existence of. And I feel that if I reread it -- particularly, if I reread it right now, with the first reading fresh in my mind -- I would probably get a lot more of them -- might understand, to pick one example out of many, what the complex relationship between Mythgarthr and America was supposed to be, a relationship (along with the relationship of parallel or crossing characters) which Wolfe hinted a lot about but did not make clear -- at least to me -- on the first reading.

But, frankly, I didn't like it enough to want to reread it -- certainly not now. (Other Wolfe works I have liked enough to reread them, whether I found time to or not.) I'd rather read something else

-- even something else of Wolfe's. Wolfe's puzzles are marvelous, but if the supporting structure isn't good enough, I don't want to take the time to figure them out. And at least in the case of *The Wizard Knight*, I didn't.

On to other topics.

I think Wolfe's writing of Abel's voice was profoundly uneven. Usually in a high and archaic register, it would lapse at times into slang -- into (to my ear) outdated slang, slang that uneasily mixed contemporary life (macs) with some sort of parody of fifties usage (swell!). The slang itself was jarringly inconsistent; and the mixture of slang into otherwise unbroken pages of high-register speech (both dialogue and the narrator's voice) was frequently awkward in the extreme. Wolfe has said in an interview that he didn't have any trouble writing a modern teenager, since he knows them and lives near them; but I think there was a real failure of tone here. Now, maybe, this is all part of some complex Wolfean trick, some deliberate mixture of tone which served some thematic, portraiture or other purpose... but I sure didn't see it. Until someone convinces me otherwise, I think this is simply a failure on his part.

I should perhaps mention that there was a lot to like here, since I've so far been mostly negative. It is, as I said, well-written (save for the -- thankfully not all that frequent -- lapses in tone just noted); it is mostly exciting. The cosmology was fascinating, the magic mysterious, many of the characters quite interesting. The reinvention of by-now standard fantasy elements -- the Norse mythos, elves, and lots more -- was refreshing and fun. There's a lot to like here.

But I think my biggest complaint -- my biggest stumbling block -- was a pair of intertwined issues: the character of Abel, and the ethics (even, politics) of the book.

First off, I found Abel frequently insufferable. Pompous, self-righteous, frequently a bully, he also came off as a Mary Sue (at least in one sense of that polyvalent term of fan critique): not only was he the most courageous and noble person about, but he also had the writer stacking the deck for him at every turn. He had more magical allies, artifacts, assistants, companions, than you could shake a stick at: an invisible ogre doing his bidding! A sky-wolf who happened to be totally loyal! Elves (called Aelf) who were his slaves (yes, not always reliable, but often enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even becomes a god halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism!*

This sort of stacking the deck is hard enough to take when the writer has some self-consciousness about what he's doing, but I didn't see any sign that Wolfe did. He simply loved his creation, and showered him with so many cheats and advantages that any honor he might have accrued felt like a cheat.

Abel adjusted with damning speed to the hierarchy of a medieval society. Here his American origins were least convincing, if not downright morally foul. It's natural for those raised in a profoundly hierarchical society to accept it as normal, to expect deference from the lower-born and give it to the higher. But it's inexplicable for an American -- even an American boy. It makes Abel seem like a deeply immoral man -- in a way that no one else in the novel seems immoral, since after all, no one else in the novel ought to have a cultural grounding in notions of equality and the malevolence of fixed class. Oh, sure, this is not absolutely true: Abel makes no effort to hide his peasant ancestry, and seems to think it doesn't matter, so he's certainly less class conscious, more egalitarian, than most of the people he meets. But he also expects an enormous level of deference from his "inferiors", and seems to regard his "superiors" as being due a great deal of it. And yes, he was frequently kind, even generous to those below him -- but in such a way that their status was perfectly clear.

For me, the incident that stuck with me was the one early on in *The Knight* where Abel went to get a sea-berth on a ship. Quoted a price by the captain, he insisted on having the best cabin (turning the captain out) at less than half the price quoted... and to get it, he literally threatened the man's life. He acted, in short, like the brigands whose thievery he used to justify their slaughter not a few chapters before, taking what he wanted because he wanted it, and -- and in some sense this was, to me, even more damning -- because he clearly felt that it was his due as a knight.

Again, if there was any sign that all of this that Wolfe was presenting a critique of Abel, that would be fine. If he was being presented as a boy who hadn't learned better, or a man trying but failing to be good... but while Wolfe's reputation as a subtle writer might make one reach for such an interpretation, I didn't see any real signs of it in the text. I got the impression that we were simply supposed to think Abel was a good and admirable person, that Wolfe certainly thought so, that he was blind to all his (quite damning) flaws.

Adam Stephanides, who hated *The Knight* (which, I hope I have made clear, I didn't), nevertheless has a passage in his self-described "rant" about it that strikes me as sadly on the mark:

Sir Able of the High Heart, the Uberknight who his inferiors willingly submit to (if not, they're treacherous curs, whom he rightfully punishes), not any of the other characters, not the world, and not the plot, such as it was. Able doesn't behave like an adolescent, magically given an adult body or not: what he does behave like is an adolescent boy's fantasy of how he would behave if given a powerful adult body. Nor does he sound in the least like an adolescent, contemporary or otherwise. When Able talks to other characters, he sounds like the generic Wolfe Competent Male; when he's narrating, he mostly sounds like Hoof, except when Wolfe throws in some incongruous "poetic" passages, or remembers that Able is supposed to be a modern teenager and tosses in a reference to Macs or baseball.

Overly-strongly put. But not, I think, fundamentally mistaken about the problems of the book.

And Wolfe's apparent (and, I believe, genuine) fundamental admiration for Abel connects to the deeply problematic ethics of the work as a whole -- and, finally, to its politics.

One of modernity's powerful cultural changes was the rotting of the chivalric code. It's crucial to remember that this happened, not due to our inability to live up to, but to historical events' revealing of its essential malevolency -- at least in the context of a (technologically, socially) modern society, if not in general. The most famous articulation of this point, I believe, is Hemingway's, in *A Farewell to Arms*:

Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the names of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

What I found most profoundly disturbing was the sense that what Wolfe was ultimately trying to do was to redeem words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow -- words that, for inescapably important moral reasons, have indeed become (if indeed they were not always) obscene.

And this, at least, I don't think was my simplifying the work of a complex writer. (Rather, I think this was my (liberal) reaction to an essentially very conservative writer.) For Wolfe said as much in an interview he did with Neil Gaiman. -- True, he can be as cagey and mysterious in interviews as he is in fiction... sometimes. But not always: and I submit that anyone who sees the following as other than straightforward is probably over-reading. Here is the exchange (I've abridged Gaiman's question):

Gaiman: [A] hundred years from now... a teenager [reads *The Wizard Knight*]. Where do you hope *The Knight* and *The Wizard* will take her?

Wolfe: To a country where honor, courage, and fidelity actually mean something. The whole knightly ideal came into being because the fighting was so close. Ordinary people saw who defended the castle and who hid in the wine cellar, who went for the enemy while his followers, well, actually followed instead of doing all the fighting for him. Communities were small; everybody knew how everybody else behaved. I want her to see what those qualities can mean to the person who has them and to those around him.

Gaiman: That's really cool. And, for want of a better word, noble.

Actually, I don't think it's cool. And I certainly don't think it's noble. I think it's, at a minimum, profoundly disturbing... arguably even, in Hemingway's word, "obscene".

And along with honor and glory and fidelity come hierarchy, and servitude, and subservience, and caste: all right there in Wolfe's book, just like the world. Along comes all the horrors of pre-modern society that were destroyed by it, even as it introduced new horrors of its own.

Now a great deal of fantasy -- not all of it, but a lot of it -- is written in a spirit of nostalgia for the pre-modern world. This nostalgia takes different forms and has different (moral, literary, personal) meanings. But I must admit I've never found it as disturbing as in Wolfe's Wizard Knight. For comparison, let me talk about Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, not only the inescapable point of comparison for almost any high fantasy work (at least in a basic sense, i.e. a fantasy work set in a world different from our own), but as a book which Wolfe and I (and half the reading world) share a love for. Because, despite Tolkien's clear nostalgia for pre-modern times, I didn't, and don't, find it nearly as problematic as I did Wolfe's Wizard Knight. Why?

Well, first off, Wolfe brings a purportedly modern voice and perspective into his pre-modern times... and has it swallow them whole. Tolkien, of course, sets his work wholly within a different time, so the lack of a modern ethical perspective is reasonable, even essential. But for Wolfe not to confront these issues implicitly ratifies things that Tolkien needn't deal with.

More importantly, for Tolkien, the good is more complex than it is for Wolfe, at least for Wolfe here. While Tolkien's characters strive to do right, The Lord of the Rings is above all about the corruption of power, the corruptibility of good intent, and the terrible dangers for even those who strive to do right. I don't see any of that in Wolfe's Wizard Knight. As my favorite reader of Tolkien, T. A. Shippey, has noted, the ring and its thematic motif of the corrupting nature of power bring into Tolkien the one modern element in an otherwise pre-modern work. That is, Tolkien brought into his work some of the complexity from the pre-modern world -- and it made his work as rich as it is. Wolfe brought in a modern element, seemingly just to show that nothing from America really needed saving or really had any valuable perspective lacking in the pre-modern world.

Similarly, for Tolkien, the evil seems far more evil than it does for Wolfe -- and far more tied to the basic issues of war and power. It is the desire for control, for gain, that is fundamentally wrong in Tolkien's work... and we see, quite powerfully, their result in things such as the powerful, Great War Trench-influenced depictions of the broken land of Mordor, and in the vivid depictions of the scouring of the shire.** Now, we see, at the end of The Wizard, some of the ruinous effects of war... but not with anything like the vividness and power in Tolkien. More to the point, Wolfe doesn't portray this as the outcome of war, but the outcome of the good guys loosing: you don't see any sense that if the humans had simply beat the Osterlings (and we are told very specifically that this begun with a raid on their lands for gain, something presented as straightforward and not at all morally troubling) that there would be anything wrong. In Tolkien, war is shown as something necessary due to a fallen world, something which is itself part of the corruption even of the good: in Wolfe, it's only too bad when you loose, and all the jousting and ridiculous fights of honor he portrays are simply something it would be jolly good to have back. (I exaggerate, but not as much as I wish I did.)

And finally, of course, Tolkien was writing long before our time -- before my time. The Lord of the Rings was written, in significant part, during the Second World War; The Wizard Knight was written, in significant part, during the so-called War on Terror. The world is different now. And that means I experience the works differently.

And here we get to something which is probably more my failure than anything else.

You see, I am far, far more suspicious of "words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow" in the present -- say, the last six years -- than I am from before. And I think that is because so many Americans experienced the attacks of September 11 as an immediate and unproblematic redemption of them. Yet it seems to me that one crucial component of the horrible mistakes and unforgivable evils that our country has committed in the past six years was precisely that redemption: of our thinking, far too much, about glory and honor and courage -- not to mention "evil doers" -- and far too little about the names of villages.

The truth is, I read *The Wizard Knight* with these words -- Wolfe's reaction to the 9-11 attacks -- ringing in my ears:

We will be told that the perpetrators (and only the perpetrators) must be punished, and that the greatest pains must be taken to make certain no innocent person suffers. That sounds much better than saying no action should be taken, but it comes to the same thing. The perpetrators cannot be punished. They died in the planes they hijacked and are beyond our reach. It is not possible to fight a war (not even a losing war) without causing innocent people to suffer.

And I thought a lot of things about them. For example, I thought that with only the smallest tweaking, they could sound like the justifications that the 9-11 attackers might themselves have used: oh, unlike what Wolfe is saying, the "perpetrators" that they would have been talking about were probably not doing crimes that I would say were clearly such. But the argument would have been the same: we can't fight a war without causing innocent people to suffer. If we aren't willing to kill the innocent, then we can't do anything. The actual perpetrators (say, the government of the U.S.) are beyond our reach, but that doesn't mean that no action should be taken. And so forth.***

(I don't want to get too sidetracked here, but of course Wolfe's comment makes an assumption, the basic mistake that has been at the root of so much of our national crimes and mistakes and lost opportunities in the past six years: assuming that "action" means "war", and that no war means no action. After all, in the legal prosecutions of criminal gangs, it is quite possible to make sure that only the guilty suffer -- or, at least, far, far more sure than in any war. That if we had responded to Al Qaeda not by comparing them to the Nazis, but by comparing them to the Mafia, all might have been different.)

But hate it or not, the politics clearly effected me here. I'm sure that the complexities in Tolkien that were lacking in Wolfe's *Wizard Knight* are a large part of my reaction to it. But the fact that Wolfe, a conservative writing in my time, a time when conservatives have done so much horrible damage to our country and the world, was a big part too.

And I hate this. I hate that my experience of what is, after all, a fantasy story unconnected to the present day, is colored by politics. I hate that my experience of the writer who, for all his failings, is one of the best writers working today (in fantasy or out of it), is colored by my knowledge of his politics.**** I hate that I can't just see the dragons and The Knights, but instead see the calls for further U.S. crimes and blunders and wars.

One of the personal things I blame Bush and his followers for is that they have created such a terrible, poisonous, and down-right evil atmosphere that I am far less capable of seeing things in political terms than I used to be -- far less capable than I would like to be.

I suspect that even in happier times I would have found *The Wizard Knight* flawed -- for its pacing, for its main character, and, yes, for its deeply problematic medieval ethics. But only nowadays would I experience this as finding it flawed for its politics.

In this sense, and this sense only, I guess I, too, wish I could go back to simpler times.

* Other writers have complained about the split focus in *The Wizard* between Abel and Toug. I, actually, felt that that was one of the things that *The Wizard* had going for it: it spent more time focusing on people who were more complex, less Blessed by The Gods (i.e. Wolfe), and thereby were, to me, far more sympathetic and (ultimately) admirable characters.

** Not in the films: to me, this was the single least excusable change in Jackson's adaptation.

*** Well, if he was worried we wouldn't kill enough innocent people, Wolfe can rest assured that we have done a bang-up job of it. (/political bitterness)

I don't mean here to say that any support of a war is equivalent to terrorist thinking; I'm not a pacifist. (Why do we always feel we have to say that? That must be one of the most repeated sentences in the country in the last few years.) I don't think war is always wrong. But I don't think war should be used to punish; I think it should be use to defend. And the latter involves not killing civilians. I'm not talking about anything more complicated than just war theory here -- a theory that the Catholic church has done a lot to develop, mostly (from what little I've seen of it) along extremely sensible lines. Wolfe, famously, is a Catholic; but I don't see the influence of Catholic thinking about war in this statement.

**** Wolfe has said (I don't have the reference handy) that he used to be a Bucklean conservative, but that now his politics are unique and personal. Of course, there are a number of political positions in this country -- minority positions, but ones with millions of followers -- whose adherents frequently view themselves as possessing unique, personal, non-partisan politics which they alone have the objectivity and distance to see. Many of these are some variety of conservative; and I think there's plenty of evidence that Wolfe fits into one of these camps. If someone wishes to correct me -- not by saying I shouldn't use his politics to judge his works (I agree), but that I've gotten his politics wrong -- then please do so.

Chris — 18 Sep 2007, 20:08 · in reply to Stephen Frug

The reviewer said:

"But I think my biggest complaint -- my biggest stumbling block -- was a pair of intertwined issues: the character of Abel, and the ethics (even, politics) of the book. First off, I found Abel frequently insufferable. Pompous, self-righteous, frequently a bully, he also came off as a Mary Sue (at least in one sense of that polyvalent term of fan critique): not only was he the most courageous and noble person about, but he also had the writer stacking the deck for him at every turn. He had more magical allies, artifacts, assistants, companions, than you could shake a stick at: an invisible ogre doing his bidding! A sky-wolf who happened to be totally loyal! Elves (called Aelf) who were his slaves (yes, not always reliable, but often enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even becomes a god halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism!* This sort of stacking the deck is hard enough to take when the writer has some self-consciousness about what he's doing, but I didn't see any sign that Wolfe did. He simply loved his creation, and showered him with so many cheats and advantages that any honor he might have accrued felt like a cheat."

Not to put too fine a point on it but I think you have missed the point to a degree, on a very basic level.

If you found Able to be insufferable, it is very likely because the author wrote him in such a way as to convey that impression.

If you find the same devices frequently used in the fantasy genre present to an extreme that is pretty recognizable, then you were probably intended to take note of it - it is unlikely to be simple obliviousness.

If you found the ethics to be problematic then perhaps the situations were intended to cause the reader to reflect on those problems.

I don't mean this to come across as hostile. But what I am saying here is that if you want to understand **any** of Wolfe's work as anything more than a rip-roarin' tale of Adventure, you have to approach it with such considerations in mind.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Sep 2007, 20:24 · follows Chris

Stephen,

First, thank you for posting this. It is a fascinating read.

Second, I would concur, though with a different spin, with Chris's response. My emphasis would be to remember that Able is a Wolfe narrator -- that is, an **unreliable** narrator. He may well be telling the truth as he sees it but he will betray by his words -- by his inconsistencies, his hesitations, and his omissions -- that the truth he sees is not necessarily the truth that happens to be the case.

Third, I wish (as a 21st-century liberal, more or less) to dispute the idea that the words "glory, honor, courage, or hallow" are somehow bad or disvalued in the modern or postmodern context.

I agree that all four terms can be used in a way that causes Bad Things to happen. But because a thing can be abused does not mean that it has no legitimate use.

Well: I will semi-grant you "glory." Glory as a value is at best ambiguous and dangerous; to seek after glory for its own sake almost inevitably leads to disastrous consequences for **someone**. But to glorify those who behave well and benefit others strikes me as a good way to encourage that behavior.

"Honor" is far less problematic. As something to fight for, it has a dangerous aspect; but as something to behave with, it is a desirable trait in all persons. The problem arises only when the two are separated -- when one expects honor without behaving honorably.

But where I really question your judgment is in disvaluing courage. Courage is that trait that leads one to do what is right despite consequences to oneself, and should not be confused with mere reckless physical bravery. It takes a great deal of courage to say "no" to injustice, and without it the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the gay rights movement, etc., would have achieved exactly nothing.

As for "hallow," well, perhaps you should tell me what it is you find so dangerous in the word. To me it is ... well, for example, I consider both the US Constitution and the United Nations

Declaration of Universal Human Rights to be hallowed documents, and I utterly concur with Abraham Lincoln in considering the battlefield at Gettysburg to be hallowed ground -- not because people died there but because of *why* they (at least the Union soldiers) died there.

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

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<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I am miserable, he is miserable,

We are miserable.

Can't we have a party? Would he rather have a party?

Brent Dyer — 18 Sep 2007, 20:32 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

I agree with Chris and, at the risk of piling on, would amplify his point even a little more.

Unlike many (most? almost all?) authors, Wolfe does not present his themes in a simple, didactic format designed to lead the reader to the answer. Most authors make it clear what behavior they approve or disapprove of by the ultimate outcome. If a character does something "bad," that character will ultimately suffer as a result or, at the very least, the reader will see how that action causes misery to other, sympathetic characters. In Wolfe, on the other hand, "bad" behavior frequently goes unpunished or, even worse, it will only hurt unsympathetic characters. Personally, I think that this makes Wolfe's writing especially realistic because it reflects what really happens---bad people do go unpunished and bad acts frequently do seem to cause ambivalent results. I think that Wolfe is reflecting the real-life tension between ethics and reality and is challenging his readers to examine their own ideas and feelings on these issues rather than simply asking them to agree with his own.

I also have to say that I disagree pretty strongly with Stephen on his argument that there is a tension between Abel as a "modern American teenager" and his ready acceptance of a rigidly hierarchical society. As the father of 5 budding pre-teens between the ages of 8 and 12, I think Wolfe has it exactly right. American teenagers live every day of their lives in a hierarchical society, albeit a society in which they sometimes have the ability to change classes. Abel did exactly what most American teenagers would do if they suddenly became the strongest, most talented, best looking person around--he stepped right up to try to join the top of the hierarchy.

Thank for sharing your review Chris, it's interesting to read the opinion of someone who didn't enjoy the books at much as I.

----- Original Message -----

From: Chris <rasputin_ at hotmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Tuesday, September 18, 2007 3:08:37 PM

Subject: Re: (urth) Long Review Essay on Wizard Knight

The reviewer said:

"But I think my biggest complaint -- my biggest stumbling block -- was a pair of intertwined issues: the character of Abel, and the ethics (even, politics) of the book.

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enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even becomes a god halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism!*

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Matthew King — 18 Sep 2007, 21:09 · in reply to Brent Dyer

On Sep 18, 2007, at 3:32 PM, Brent Dyer wrote:

Abel did exactly what most American teenagers would do if they suddenly became the strongest, most talented, best looking person around--he stepped right up to try to join the top of the hierarchy.

Compare with the movie "Mean Girls".

Wait, did I just admit to watching that?

Stephen Frug — 18 Sep 2007, 21:13 · follows Matthew King

Thanks for the comments so far! I think I'll wait until I reply fully, hoping that there will be more of them.

And don't worry about "piling on" -- I knew what I was doing when I posted a largely critical review of a Gene Wolfe to a Gene Wolfe board. I expected disagreement -- in fact I hoped for it, since I'm curious about other's views.

But I will ask responders to keep in mind two (related) things.

First, please don't assume I've never read Wolfe before, and/or don't understand how complex his works can sometimes be. I worked hard to make it clear that I have read a lot of Wolfe (not everything he's written, but a great many of his books), and that I *do* understand how complex he can be. I know that Wolfe "has never in his life told a straightforward tale" -- that's

why I quoted John Clute to that effect.

It's simply that I don't think that **everything** about his work is that complex; I would argue that there is a surface **as well as** depth to his works.

Which leads me to point two: I don't think it's a sufficient answer to say that any criticism must **a priori** be wrong since this book is written by Wolfe. I made -- I trust -- a good prima facie case about some problems in *The Wizard Knight* (problems that I **don't** think all his work has -- thus my examples of *The Book of the New Sun* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* as more complex and, I argue, ultimately more successful works).

This, it seems to me, switches the burden of proof. I **acknowledge** that Wolfe is a subtle, devious writer who uses unreliable narrators and tells his stories in oblique and hard-to-decipher ways. **Despite this** I claim that the criticisms I made hold.

Thus it's not answer to say that "perhaps something more complex is going on", or "Wolfe's narrators are sometimes unreliable": I think that you have to actually **argue** that in **this** case this is true **in ways relevant to my critiques**. Either make the case here, or present a link to another case.

I think this is true in all of the aspects of this argument.... but most especially in terms of a sentiment like "If you found the ethics to be problematic then perhaps the situations were intended to cause the reader to reflect on those problems.", where I not only made a textual case, but also pointed towards a lot of extra-textual evidence about Wolfe's views and intents.

None of this is to say that I think my position is unassailable: on the contrary, I posted the review here because I am interested in counter-arguments. But I am interested in counter-**arguments**, not unsubstantiated claims that it is (or, worse, a priori must be) more complex than I am presuming.

I look forward to more arguing against my position! (Or, heck, for it too. If people pile on great, but I wouldn't **mind** agreement. :>)

Stephen Frug

PS: Oh, and remember that "glory, honor, courage, or hallow" is a **quote** -- from Ernest Hemingway -- not my words. I presented it as an exemplar of a broader change in attitude that occurred (in complex ways at various times, but most especially) after the first world war. If you think I'm wrong that this happened, or this attitude's wrong, then fine. But to nit-pick the choice of those four words is to miss the point: they weren't my words, it was my citation of another's words.

(The block-quote is clearer in the blog-version of this review, which you can find here:

<http://stephenfrug.blogspot.com/2007/09/writer-as-werewolf-mixed-thoughts-on.html>

-- I apologize if my unfamiliarity with the formatting of the Urth list made what was a quote and what wasn't less clear than it should have been.)

stilskin — 18 Sep 2007, 21:23 · in reply to Stephen Frug

--- Stephen Frug <sfrug at post.harvard.edu> wrote:

If people pile on great, but I wouldn't **mind** agreement. :>

For what it's worth, I agree with you Stephen on many of your points. Totally as far as Wolfe's inability to convincingly write dialogue for a modern teenager. And partially when it comes to Abel as an exemplar of some really awful "virtues" -- I think that Wolfe does really confuse a kind of mythical chivalry with what it must have been like in the real world, and his conservative religious beliefs make him yearn for a return to this mythical past which he believes was a factual one. Abel is an unreliable narrator, but I think he's a reliable guide to what Wolfe believes is noble, heroic, courageous, etc. behavior. This is even more true, IMO, of Chris in Pirate Freedom, which on the surface appears much more straightforward than WK but actually, at least from a moral or religious perspective, seems to me a far more troublesome book -- troublesome in the sense of its underlying argument being highly complicated and at odds with its surface.

Stephen Frug

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Sep 2007, 22:13 · follows stilskin

Stephen,

I am not a scholar, nor do I portray one on this list. I'm this guy who writes stuff. As such I take responsibility for what I write, and hope others will do likewise.

Why did I pick on the four words you quoted from Hemingway? Because you chose them to quote; I took it that you considered that quote to make a point you wished to make, as well as or better than you could make it (the alternative assumption, that it was an appeal to authority, would be uncharitable, not only because it's a bad form of argument, but because Hemingway is a bad form of authority). That being the case, I went after the quote because I deeply disagree with the point it makes.

I do not think that modernism involves some Nietzschean "revaluation of all values." I think that courage and honor are still valid and valuable in the modern world (I won't say the postmodern world; it is debateable whether the postmodern stance allows *anything* to be valid or valuable). I think that glory may be more ambiguous in the modern world than it was in the classical world, but that it was at least dangerous there, and that it has at least some potential value and validity here. And if you take Wolfe's formulation, which (if I recall) is honor, courage, and fidelity, you have three things that I regard as among the most basic values of any civilized society.

Thus, a critique that seems to make the assumption that these values are dangerous -- indeed, to take this as a given that the reader will inevitably agree with -- is going to receive from me a reaction somewhere on the scale from "hostile" to "what the *fuck*!?!", no matter whether that critique is of Wolfe, of Tolkien (who had seen on the battlefields of WWI the very things that created Hemingway's alienation from these values), or of some writer I don't even *like*.

If you can't tell, I most assuredly don't disagree with you because you are criticizing Wolfe. I've done so occasionally: for example, I find some of his more conservative values a bit distressing, and become frustrated with his assumption that his readers are as smart as he is and can figure out his puzzles. Lord knows I'm not.

No; I disagree with you because I find the values you express in your critique distressing, much as you apparently do those Wolfe expresses (or appears to express) in his novel. I therefore addressed your critique primarily at that level.

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I am miserable, he is miserable,

We are miserable.

Can't we have a party? Would he rather have a party?

Chris — 18 Sep 2007, 22:32 · in reply to Stephen Frug

I would agree with what you are saying to a point - it is a dangerous practice to assume that simply every tiny detail is crafted and planned to have a deeper, inscrutable meaning. However the reason I pointed to the particular things that I did was that these are not items that are at all inscrutable or obscure. The problematic ethics are standard fare in Wolfe, and it's almost never safe to assume that they simply present straightforward mouthpieces for Wolfe's position on a given issue. (Even with characters like Silk who seem much more plausible "heroes" than Able).

The advantages heaped on Able are a transparent mirror to those that are really, really common in the fantasy genre. The fact that they usually do not appear in such a jarring, obvious way makes it less plausible, if anything, that Wolfe was unaware of what he was doing. And further, given how Wolfe exploits a number of disconnects, including the difference between the romanticized knight and what the knight, as described and put in context must have actually been like, it doesn't seem just "possible" but rather sort of glaringly obvious that

genre conventions are going to be turned around.

I did not point these things out to nitpick, or to claim to have some obscure mystical knowledge of Wolfe's master plan. I pointed them out because I feel they are very basic and not tremendously controversial or arcane. Whether it makes a big deal to your review I suppose depends primarily on how deeply these considerations affected your initial orientation when you set out to interpret the books.-- "When small men begin to cast big shadows, it means that the sun is about to set." -- Lin Yutang

Date: Tue, 18 Sep 2007 17:13:55 -0400To: urth at urth.netFrom: sfrug at post.harvard.eduSubject: Re: (urth) Long Review Essay on Wizard Knight

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Stephen Frug — 18 Sep 2007, 23:39 · follows Chris

Dan'I,

When I quoted Hemingway, I was not appealing to authority (which of course I agree is not a relevant mode of argument), but nor was I saying that his every word was precisely what I would have written myself; I was doing something else, namely, citing him as an example of a change in attitude, the general thrust of which I agreed with -- which doesn't mean that I agree with every word he wrote (particularly given that that quote is from a novel, etc.).

All of which is to say: if you disagree with this view, then fine: that's a valid point of view. I might engage you on it later. You are certainly right that I more or less assumed that readers would agree with what I am calling the modern view, and that if you don't, WTF is a reasonable response.

As for the criticize me for criticizing Wolfe... remember that my earlier post was a general post: I don't think you were doing that.

Anyway, let me reiterate that I am not trying to shut off criticism, and that I hope that this discussion can be conducted with mutual respect on all sides.

As i said, I was writing in a way that assumed agreement... probably I unwise, but what can I say, I'm imperfect... and I'm not sure I want to get into a meta-argument about the value of these values. (Though, again, it was certainly a reasonable line of critique for you to make.)

But as a basic stab, let me try this. You rightly re-focus attention on Wolfe's words rather than Hemingways, and cite the trio from the Gaiman interview (which I also cited): "honor, courage, and fidelity". So I'll phrase my point using those words.

Wolfe says -- to put those words in a bit of context -- that he hoped The Wizard Knight would take readers "To a country where honor, courage, and fidelity actually mean something".

I agree that honor, courage and fidelity are words that can have perfectly valid, worthy meanings -- in today's world, among others.

But I think that the specific meanings of those words that is implied not only by their being used together, but also by the implication that today's world is not one in which they "actually mean something"

-- in other words, the meanings specified by an idea that it is the specific meanings of the words that is absent in today's world but present in the society portrayed in the Wizard Knight -- I think that those specific meanings of those three words add up to a specific set of ideas -- an idealized version of a medieval knightly ideal -- which is basically the same set of ideas that Hemingway's quote was pointing to.

And I certainly will maintain that, in today's world, that idea -- the one pointed to by both Hemingway's sentence (negatively) and Wolfe's sentence from the Gaiman interview (positively), and which I argue is pointed to in Wolfe's Wizard Knight -- I think that that idea is, in fact, quite troubling and dangerous. Which, again, is not to say that there aren't other types of

honor, courage and fidelity which remain perfectly valid, indeed crucial, values.

Hope that clarifies.

Stephen

brunians at brunians.org — 18 Sep 2007, 23:47 · in reply to Stephen Frug

I might engage you on it later. You are certainly right that I more or less assumed that readers would agree with what I am calling the modern view....

Not a good assumption, necessarily, with this audience.

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Brent Dyer — 19 Sep 2007, 00:16 · follows brunians at brunians.org

Stephen wrote:

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First, in the interest of full disclosure, I must admit to being mostly ignorant about Hemingway and his work because I find him to be personally distasteful and his writing to be mind-numbingly boring. Others (many others, actually) certainly disagree with me, and, given his pretty well-established place in literature, I cannot be too derisive of their opinions. In other words, I can't discount the possibility that my problem with Hemingway is the result of my own flaws and not his.

Having said all that, I can't help but think that Stephen is overreading the quote from a Farewell to Arms:

" Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the names of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."

It seems to me that Hemingway is not saying that the words "glory, honor, courage, or hallow" are inherently obscene. Rather, he seems to be saying that, in the context of WWI which was--in many ways--a rather nihilistic conflict, the use of those words to justify the fighting and

destruction was obscene when considered next to the the things and people that were destroyed or damaged by the violence that they precipitated.

I'm not sure Stephen is suggesting by saying that Wolfe's use of "honor, courage, and fidelity" in the Gaiman interview is "dangerous." Are we to, instead, prefer a world that favors pettiness, cowardice, and betrayal? That seems dangerous.

Before I get accused of being a "conservative," let me assure everyone that I am a moderate with liberal leanings. That does not mean, however, that I can't agree with Wolfe's principles on some of these things. What Wolfe seems to be doing in the Gaiman interview is bemoaning that perversion of those words in modern parlance.

How many times were the words "honor" and "courage" used to justify the invasion of Iraq? Quite a lot. How much did starting that war actually have to do with either of those things? In my opinion, they weren't even considerations for the Bush administration--they were just once-powerful, noble words that have been turned into props and propaganda for the brand of American political opportunism that, unfortunately and sadly, seems to be practiced equally by both liberals and conservatives.

There is nothing wrong with true honor, courage and fidelity. The real problem is with the people who have soiled those words with greed, deception, and hatred.

Spencer Hensley — 19 Sep 2007, 00:26 · follows Brent Dyer

Thank you for posting this, Stephen.

I'm glad to see a little criticism here, and in some ways it was, perhaps, *courageous* (GASP!) of you to make such a post and face what you must have known would be nearly uniform disagreement. Though I count myself as a large fan of Wolfe (though, no where near as large a *reader* of Wolfe as I would like to be, and as many of the other, more frequent posters, are), I am sometimes annoyed by the seeming tendency to respond to any criticism with "obviously you just didn't get it," or to assume that there simply **MUST** be some depth that remains unseen. Not that such responses aren't sometimes--even most of the time--suitable, but even Wolfe has his weaknesses, as do all writers.

Like you, I liked The Wizard Knight. I really did! But, also like you, I took issue with the problematic ethical stances taken by a modern character such as Abel. I have always been uneasy with the ethical behavior of Wolfe's heroes, but in every other case have been willing to write it off as a realistic representation of behavior in the given environment. Abel, however, as a modern American teenager, should have, I felt, struggled to some degree with the behavior he was exhibiting.

I am actually willing to concede to the "unreliable narrator" argument, here. It stands to reason that Able, as an adolescent boy, might want to present himself in such a light. Here I agree with Adam Stephanides insofar as I think the novel reads like a "boy's fantasy of how he would behave if given a powerful adult body." But at the end of the day... that's just not an interesting subject to me! It's an instance where I think Wolfe's unreliable narrator actually fails him in a fundamental way.

Anyway, chalk one post up for "support."
Thanks!

On 9/18/07, Stephen Frug <sfrug at post.harvard.edu> wrote:

Greetings Urthlings. I've read this message list before, but never posted to it. (Unless this message is itself a duplicate... the first time seems to have gotten lost...) But I just wrote a long review of Wizard Knight which I posted to my blog (<http://stephenfrug.blogspot.com>), and I thought that readers here would be interested in it -- and I am definitely interested in responses -- so I am cross-posting it. Hope that's okay. If my links & block-quote formatting don't come through, you can go to the blog-version to get them.

I just finished reading Gene Wolfe's two-volume novel, *The Wizard Knight*, made up of *The Knight* (2004) and *The Wizard* (2005). The following is a long essay reviewing (in some sense) the work, focusing on what I found problematic about it, rather than the (quite considerable number of things) I liked in it. This review-essay will have spoilers -- not major ones, but existent ones -- for the entirety of the work. Now, I'm not spoiling, I don't think, any of the Big Secrets from the book -- certainly not from the second half, where the cluster. So, in my opinion, there's nothing here that would really "spoil" a first reading of the work if you haven't read it yet. But if you want to approach it with no knowledge whatsoever, you should stop reading here. (Oh, and I guess there are spoilers for *The Lord of the Rings* too.)

I think my most basic reaction is that it's good but not Wolfe's best -- not up there with *The Book of the New Sun* or *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, say. That it's well written is not in doubt: it's by Wolfe, after all. But I had some problems with it -- some of which are probably in my head, some of which are in the work, and some of which are in the chemical mixture of the two.

It's hard to criticize Wolfe, though, because of his reputation as a trickster: if you present a negative opinion of anything the man writes, you instantly lay yourself open to the charge that you just didn't get it. And not infrequently the charge will be valid. But it won't always be valid: Wolfe is human, humans are imperfect, and even Shakespeare wrote some clunkers. And while a lot of aspects of Wolfe's fiction are far more complex than they appear even at third glance, other aspects are, finally, not: they are straightforward, despite the efforts of Wolfe's more serious fans (an overlapping but not identical group to Wolfe's more serious readers) to try and make them so.

And, for me at least, it's even more intimidating when the backs of the books are filled with breathless praise from some of my other favorite writers: Neil Gaiman! Kim Stanley Robinson! Everyone seems to agree that this is the very best book since Wolfe's last very best book, and you just have to love it!

Well, I didn't. I liked it, but also had some real problems with it. So at the risk of derision for missing the point, I'm going to begin with some straightforward critiques of a writer who (in John Clute's apt words) "has never in his life told a straightforward tale".

I think the first half of *The Knight* was slow. There were a number of places where, if the book hadn't said Gene Wolfe on the cover, I

would have given up. Partly this was because the book, while being slow, presented itself mostly as an adventure book: it was not slow in the good way that, say, Proust is. It was slow where it shouldn't have been. For me, at least, this lessened as I went along, and by the end of *The Knight* I was fully gripped, and stayed so through *The Wizard*.

In a related criticism, the book was unevenly paced. This is related, not identical, because I'm not just referring to the first half of volume one. The rest of volume one and the first two-thirds or so of volume two, while never (for me) dull, proceeded at a stately pace through the events of the tale -- leaving the ending to be told at breakneck speed and with more-than-usual abridgement. Parts of this are due to Wolfe's habit of telling the most serious parts of his stories by indirection -- but only, I think, parts.

Wolfe's uneven pacing is actually habitual for him -- there are traces of it in *The Book of the New Sun*, and it's a more serious problem in *The Book of the Long Sun*. And at this point I'm coming around to the belief that while this is partly due to careful authorial craft, it is also partly a failure of it: Wolfe simply gets too wrapped up in the early stages of some of his adventures and tells them at (at times) tedious length.

Wolfe, as has been frequently noted, writes puzzles, works which hint at stories and cosmology and theology which are only partly and obscurely visible on the surface. But he also writes (and clearly likes to write and, from what he's said of his reading tastes, likes) adventure stories which form the surface under which those puzzles move. And while Wolfe is a genius at writing puzzles, he is, I think, uneven at writing adventures. He likes it more than he's good at it. And I find that my favorite Wolfe works are often those where he doesn't try -- in his short stories, for instance, in which he is often simply doing something else.

There are a lot of interpretive puzzles in *The Wizard Knight*, as there are in all of Wolfe's work. Some of them I got the first time around. Others I didn't; still others I probably even missed the existence of. And I feel that if I reread it -- particularly, if I reread it right now, with the first reading fresh in my mind -- I would probably get a lot more of them -- might understand, to pick one example out of many, what the complex relationship between Mythgarthr and America was supposed to be, a relationship (along with the relationship of parallel or crossing characters) which Wolfe hinted a lot about but did not make clear -- at least to me -- on the first reading.

But, frankly, I didn't like it enough to want to reread it -- certainly not now. (Other Wolfe works I have liked enough to reread them, whether I found time to or not.) I'd rather read something else -- even something else of Wolfe's. Wolfe's puzzles are marvelous, but if the supporting structure isn't good enough, I don't want to take the time to figure them out. And at least in the case of *The Wizard Knight*, I didn't.

On to other topics.

I think Wolfe's writing of Abel's voice was profoundly uneven. Usually in a high and archaic register, it would lapse at times into slang -- into (to my ear) outdated slang, slang that uneasily mixed contemporary life (macs) with some sort of parody of fifties usage (swell!). The slang itself was jarringly inconsistent; and the mixture of slang into otherwise unbroken pages of high-register speech (both dialogue and the narrator's voice) was frequently awkward in the extreme. Wolfe has said in an interview that he didn't have any trouble writing a modern teenager, since he knows them and lives near them; but I think there was a real failure of tone here. Now, maybe, this is all part of some complex Wolfean trick, some deliberate mixture of tone which served some thematic, portraiture or other purpose... but I sure didn't see it. Until someone convinces me otherwise, I think this is simply a failure on his part.

I should perhaps mention that there was a lot to like here, since I've so far been mostly negative. It is, as I said, well-written (save for the -- thankfully not all that frequent -- lapses in tone just noted); it is mostly exciting. The cosmology was fascinating, the magic mysterious, many of the characters quite interesting. The reinvention of by-now standard fantasy elements -- the Norse mythos, elves, and lots more -- was refreshing and fun. There's a lot to like here.

But I think my biggest complaint -- my biggest stumbling block -- was a pair of intertwined issues: the character of Abel, and the ethics (even, politics) of the book.

First off, I found Abel frequently insufferable. Pompous, self-righteous, frequently a bully, he also came off as a Mary Sue (at least in one sense of that polyvalent term of fan critique): not only was he the most courageous and noble person about, but he also had the writer stacking the deck for him at every turn. He had more magical allies, artifacts, assistants, companions, than you could shake a stick at: an invisible ogre doing his bidding! A sky-wolf who happened to be totally loyal! Elves (called Aelf) who were his slaves (yes, not always reliable, but often enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even becomes a god halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism!*

This sort of stacking the deck is hard enough to take when the writer has some self-consciousness about what he's doing, but I didn't see any sign that Wolfe did. He simply loved his creation, and showered him with so many cheats and advantages that any honor he might have accrued felt like a cheat.

Abel adjusted with damning speed to the hierarchy of a medieval society. Here his American origins were least convincing, if not downright morally foul. It's natural for those raised in a profoundly hierarchical society to accept it as normal, to expect deference from the lower-born and give it to the higher. But it's inexplicable for an American -- even an American boy. It makes Abel seem like a deeply immoral man -- in a way that no one else in the novel seems immoral, since after all, no one else in the novel ought to have a cultural grounding in notions of equality and the malevolence of fixed class. Oh, sure, this is not absolutely true: Abel makes no effort to hide

his peasant ancestry, and seems to think it doesn't matter, so he's certainly less class conscious, more egalitarian, than most of the people he meets. But he also expects an enormous level of deference from his "inferiors", and seems to regard his "superiors" as being due a great deal of it. And yes, he was frequently kind, even generous to those below him -- but in such a way that their status was perfectly clear.

For me, the incident that stuck with me was the one early on in *The Knight* where Abel went to get a sea-berth on a ship. Quoted a price by the captain, he insisted on having the best cabin (turning the captain out) at less than half the price quoted... and to get it, he literally threatened the man's life. He acted, in short, like the brigands whose thievery he used to justify their slaughter not a few chapters before, taking what he wanted because he wanted it, and -- and in some sense this was, to me, even more damning -- because he clearly felt that it was his due as a knight.

Again, if there was any sign that all of this that Wolfe was presenting a critique of Abel, that would be fine. If he was being presented as a boy who hadn't learned better, or a man trying but failing to be good... but while Wolfe's reputation as a subtle writer might make one reach for such an interpretation, I didn't see any real signs of it in the text. I got the impression that we were simply supposed to think Abel was a good and admirable person, that Wolfe certainly thought so, that he was blind to all his (quite damning) flaws.

Adam Stephanides, who hated *The Knight* (which, I hope I have made clear, I didn't), nevertheless has a passage in his self-described "rant" about it that strikes me as sadly on the mark:

Sir Able of the High Heart, the Uberknight who his inferiors willingly submit to (if not, they're treacherous curs, whom he rightfully punishes), not any of the other characters, not the world, and not the plot, such as it was. Able doesn't behave like an adolescent, magically given an adult body or not: what he does behave like is an adolescent boy's fantasy of how he would behave if given a powerful adult body. Nor does he sound in the least like an adolescent, contemporary or otherwise. When Able talks to other characters, he sounds like the generic Wolfe Competent Male; when he's narrating, he mostly sounds like Hoof, except when Wolfe throws in some incongruous "poetic" passages, or remembers that Able is supposed to be a modern teenager and tosses in a reference to Macs or baseball.

Overly-strongly put. But not, I think, fundamentally mistaken about the problems of the book.

And Wolfe's apparent (and, I believe, genuine) fundamental admiration for Abel connects to the deeply problematic ethics of the work as a whole -- and, finally, to its politics.

One of modernity's powerful cultural changes was the rotting of the chivalric code. It's crucial to remember that this happened, not due to our inability to live up to, but to historical events' revealing of its essential malevolency -- at least in the context of a

(technologically, socially) modern society, if not in general. The most famous articulation of this point, I believe, is Hemmingway's, in *A Farewell to Arms*:

Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the names of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

What I found most profoundly disturbing was the sense that what Wolfe was ultimately trying to do was to redeem words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow -- words that, for inescapably important moral reasons, have indeed become (if indeed they were not always) obscene.

And this, at least, I don't think was my simplifying the work of a complex writer. (Rather, I think this was my (liberal) reaction to an essentially very conservative writer.) For Wolfe said as much in an interview he did with Neil Gaiman. -- True, he can be as cagey and mysterious in interviews as he is in fiction... sometimes. But not always: and I submit that anyone who sees the following as other than straightforward is probably over-reading. Here is the exchange (I've abridged Gaiman's question):

Gaiman: [A] hundred years from now... a teenager [reads *The Wizard Knight*]. Where do you hope *The Knight* and *The Wizard* will take her?

Wolfe: To a country where honor, courage, and fidelity actually mean something. The whole knightly ideal came into being because the fighting was so close. Ordinary people saw who defended the castle and who hid in the wine cellar, who went for the enemy while his followers, well, actually followed instead of doing all the fighting for him. Communities were small; everybody knew how everybody else behaved. I want her to see what those qualities can mean to the person who has them and to those around him.

Gaiman: That's really cool. And, for want of a better word, noble.

Actually, I don't think it's cool. And I certainly don't think it's noble. I think it's, at a minimum, profoundly disturbing... arguably even, in Hemingway's word, "obscene".

And along with honor and glory and fidelity come hierarchy, and servitude, and subservience, and caste: all right there in Wolfe's book, just like the world. Along comes all the horrors of pre-modern society that were destroyed by it, even as it introduced new horrors of its own.

Now a great deal of fantasy -- not all of it, but a lot of it -- is written in a spirit of nostalgia for the pre-modern world. This nostalgia takes different forms and has different (moral, literary, personal) meanings. But I must admit I've never found it as disturbing as in Wolfe's *Wizard Knight*. For comparison, let me talk about Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, not only the inescapable point of comparison for almost any high fantasy work (at least in a basic sense, i.e. a fantasy work set in a world different from our own), but as a book which Wolfe and I (and half the reading world) share a love for. Because, despite Tolkien's clear nostalgia for pre-modern

times, I didn't, and don't, find it nearly as problematic as I did Wolfe's Wizard Knight. Why?

Well, first off, Wolfe brings a purportedly modern voice and perspective into his pre-modern times... and has it swallow them whole. Tolkien, of course, sets his work wholly within a different time, so the lack of a modern ethical perspective is reasonable, even essential. But for Wolfe not to confront these issues implicitly ratifies things that Tolkien needn't deal with.

More importantly, for Tolkien, the good is more complex than it is for Wolfe, at least for Wolfe here. While Tolkien's characters strive to do right, *The Lord of the Rings* is above all about the corruption of power, the corruptibility of good intent, and the terrible dangers for even those who strive to do right. I don't see any of that in Wolfe's *Wizard Knight*. As my favorite reader of Tolkien, T. A. Shippey, has noted, the ring and its thematic motif of the corrupting nature of power bring into Tolkien the one modern element in an otherwise pre-modern work. That is, Tolkien brought into his work some of the complexity from the pre-modern world -- and it made his work as rich as it is. Wolfe brought in a modern element, seemingly just to show that nothing from America really needed saving or really had any valuable perspective lacking in the pre-modern world.

Similarly, for Tolkien, the evil seems far more evil than it does for Wolfe -- and far more tied to the basic issues of war and power. It is the desire for control, for gain, that is fundamentally wrong in Tolkien's work... and we see, quite powerfully, their result in things such as the powerful, Great War Trench-influenced depictions of the broken land of Mordor, and in the vivid depictions of the scouring of the shire.** Now, we see, at the end of *The Wizard*, some of the ruinous effects of war... but not with anything like the vividness and power in Tolkien. More to the point, Wolfe doesn't portray this as the outcome of war, but the outcome of the good guys loosing: you don't see any sense that if the humans had simply beat the Osterlings (and we are told very specifically that this begun with a raid on their lands for gain, something presented as straightforward and not at all morally troubling) that there would be anything wrong. In Tolkien, war is shown as something necessary due to a fallen world, something which is itself part of the corruption even of the good: in Wolfe, it's only too bad when you loose, and all the jousting and ridiculous fights of honor he portrays are simply something it would be jolly good to have back. (I exaggerate, but not as much as I wish I did.)

And finally, of course, Tolkien was writing long before our time -- before my time. *The Lord of the Rings* was written, in significant part, during the Second World War; *The Wizard Knight* was written, in significant part, during the so-called War on Terror. The world is different now. And that means I experience the works differently.

And here we get to something which is probably more my failure than anything else.

You see, I am far, far more suspicious of "words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow" in the present -- say, the last six years -- than I am from before. And I think that is because so many

Americans experienced the attacks of September 11 as an immediate and unproblematic redemption of them. Yet it seems to me that one crucial component of the horrible mistakes and unforgivable evils that our country has committed in the past six years was precisely that redemption: of our thinking, far too much, about glory and honor and courage -- not to mention "evil doers" -- and far too little about the names of villages.

The truth is, I read *The Wizard Knight* with these words -- Wolfe's reaction to the 9-11 attacks -- ringing in my ears:

We will be told that the perpetrators (and only the perpetrators) must be punished, and that the greatest pains must be taken to make certain no innocent person suffers. That sounds much better than saying no action should be taken, but it comes to the same thing. The perpetrators cannot be punished. They died in the planes they hijacked and are beyond our reach. It is not possible to fight a war (not even a losing war) without causing innocent people to suffer.

And I thought a lot of things about them. For example, I thought that with only the smallest tweaking, they could sound like the justifications that the 9-11 attackers might themselves have used: oh, unlike what Wolfe is saying, the "perpetrators" that they would have been talking about were probably not doing crimes that I would say were clearly such. But the argument would have been the same: we can't fight a war without causing innocent people to suffer. If we aren't willing to kill the innocent, then we can't do anything. The actual perpetrators (say, the government of the U.S.) are beyond our reach, but that doesn't mean that no action should be taken. And so forth.***

(I don't want to get too sidetracked here, but of course Wolfe's comment makes an assumption, the basic mistake that has been at the root of so much of our national crimes and mistakes and lost opportunities in the past six years: assuming that "action" means "war", and that no war means no action. After all, in the legal prosecutions of criminal gangs, it is quite possible to make sure that only the guilty suffer -- or, at least, far, far more sure than in any war. That if we had responded to Al Qaeda not by comparing them to the Nazis, but by comparing them to the Mafia, all might have been different.)

But hate it or not, the politics clearly effected me here. I'm sure that the complexities in Tolkien that were lacking in Wolfe's *Wizard Knight* are a large part of my reaction to it. But the fact that Wolfe, a conservative writing in my time, a time when conservatives have done so much horrible damage to our country and the world, was a big part too.

And I hate this. I hate that my experience of what is, after all, a fantasy story unconnected to the present day, is colored by politics. I hate that my experience of the writer who, for all his failings, is one of the best writers working today (in fantasy or out of it), is colored by my knowledge of his politics.**** I hate that I can't just see the dragons and The Knights, but instead see the calls for further U.S. crimes and blunders and wars.

One of the personal things I blame Bush and his followers for is that they have created such a terrible, poisonous, and down-right evil atmosphere that I am far less capable of seeing things in political terms than I used to be -- far less capable than I would like to be.

I suspect that even in happier times I would have found *The Wizard Knight* flawed -- for its pacing, for its main character, and, yes, for its deeply problematic medieval ethics. But only nowadays would I experience this as finding it flawed for its politics.

In this sense, and this sense only, I guess I, too, wish I could go back to simpler times.

* Other writers have complained about the split focus in *The Wizard* between Abel and Toug. I, actually, felt that that was one of the things that *The Wizard* had going for it: it spent more time focusing on people who were more complex, less Blessed by The Gods (i.e. Wolfe), and thereby were, to me, far more sympathetic and (ultimately) admirable characters.

** Not in the films: to me, this was the single least excusable change in Jackson's adaptation.

*** Well, if he was worried we wouldn't kill enough innocent people, Wolfe can rest assured that we have done a bang-up job of it. (/political bitterness)

I don't mean here to say that any support of a war is equivalent to terrorist thinking; I'm not a pacifist. (Why do we always feel we have to say that? That must be one of the most repeated sentences in the country in the last few years.) I don't think war is always wrong. But I don't think war should be used to punish; I think it should be use to defend. And the latter involves not killing civilians. I'm not talking about anything more complicated than just war theory here -- a theory that the Catholic church has done a lot to develop, mostly (from what little I've seen of it) along extremely sensible lines. Wolfe, famously, is a Catholic; but I don't see the influence of Catholic thinking about war in this statement.

**** Wolfe has said (I don't have the reference handy) that he used to be a Bucklean conservative, but that now his politics are unique and personal. Of course, there are a number of political positions in this country -- minority positions, but ones with millions of followers -- whose adherents frequently view themselves as possessing unique, personal, non-partisan politics which they alone have the objectivity and distance to see. Many of these are some variety of conservative; and I think there's plenty of evidence that Wolfe fits into one of these camps. If someone wishes to correct me -- not by saying I shouldn't use his politics to judge his works (I agree), but that I've gotten his politics wrong -- then please do so.

And, of course, I did not believe you were appealing to authority.

Hemingway does, indeed, represent a kind of sea-change in attitude and values, which we might as well call "modernism" (though the application of that term to others, like Joyce and Proust, leaves me gaping, wondering if the term actually means anything at all!) But that change was not as universal, by any means, as academic modernists seem to believe; not only is it generally untrue of conservatives (whom academic modernists tend to think of as ignorant and discount in any survey of attitudes), but of a surprising number of folks who would identify themselves as liberal.

In this particular group, you've got everything from traditionalists to modernists to some pretty serious pomos.

I take Wolfe's comment -- "a country where honor, courage, and fidelity actually mean something" -- not as a general statement that they do not in the here-and-now, but that they are disvalued by, well, modernism. They do mean something in the here and now: try suggesting to a United States Marine that they do not. (I promise to send flowers.)

Before Hemingway, the medieval knightly ideal had been far better dissected and shown as flawed by other writers, notably Twain (who skewers it gorgeously in "A Connecticut Yankee") and Cabell (any number of his "comedies").

But the problem with the m.k.i. is not its failure as an ideal, but the failure of humans to live up to it: in short, the same problem that any serious ideal tends to face. I believe that Wolfe, to his credit, does show Able at times in a light that suggests that, even with all the helps and cheat codes he's given, he is not able to live up to it. (Able believes he does, but that's a separate matter, and is the reason I mentioned, earlier, the unreliability of Wolfe's narrators. Of *course* Abel believes he is a parfit gentil knight. But he isn't.)

And I certainly will maintain that, in today's world, that idea -- the one pointed to by both Hemingway's sentence (negatively) and Wolfe's sentence from the Gaiman interview (positively), and which I argue is pointed to in Wolfe's Wizard Knight -- I think that that idea is, in fact, quite troubling and dangerous. Which, again, is not to say that there aren't other types of honor, courage and fidelity which remain perfectly valid, indeed crucial, values.

May I inquire, gently, _why_ you find the knightly ideal "troubling"?

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I am miserable, he is miserable,

We are miserable.

Can't we have a party? Would he rather have a party?

brunians at brunians.org — 19 Sep 2007, 01:58 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

In this particular group, you've got everything from traditionalists to modernists to some pretty serious pomos.

California Indian nation, inhabiting Sonoma and Mendocino county?

They are pretty interesting folks, I'll grant you. I didn't know that we had any here.

They're mostly Christians these days.

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Stephen Frug — 19 Sep 2007, 02:36 · follows brunians at brunians.org

May I inquire, gently, why you find the knightly ideal
"troubling"?

I know that this opens me up to a (fully justifiable) charge of ducking an issue that I myself raised, but I don't want to get too far into this... largely because I don't think I can without getting into broad political (if not historical and moral) questions that are really off topic to Wolfe. I guess what I'd say is that my objection (or that objection) only stands to those who find the knightly ideal

-- at least in the comparatively undiluted form that (if I'm right) is presented in Wizard Knight; to the degree it's present in Tolkien, as I said in my initial review, it doesn't bother me nearly as much

-- and from others, a simple "well, I like and approve of the politics" would be enough for us to agree to disagree.

I also don't think my objections to the knightly ideal are particularly original, nor for that matter particularly well thought-out (I do study history, but my focus is American history, so the topic doesn't come up much).

But, all that said, the briefest version is that my objections to the knightly ideal are those which have been made frequently, those inherent in modern ideals and those portrayed from many different angles by many different authors (some of which you cite!). It's fundamentally hierarchical in a fixed, birth-by-class sense; it relies on fidelity to persons (not simply family and friends, but in larger, political senses) rather than ideals and institutions in a way that -- at least in the modern world -- becomes very destructive; it supports the use of violence as a legitimate means of settling disputes in cases where it is not the last resort; and so forth.

(On that last point, I'm now wishing I'd bookmarked a fascinating piece I read recently, summarizing a scholar's work, about how cultures of honor arise in places where there is no dependable rule of law, from the frontier to ineffectively policed urban settings to criminal cultures, and therefore honor, backed up by a threat of violence, arises as a substitute. But, of course, I didn't bookmark it, and probably couldn't find it again. Alas.)

I think that, fundamentally, the knightly ideal is conservative -- in one of the important senses of the term -- and I am not: I believe in liberal ideals such as the independent rule of law, democracy, the fundamental equality of all persons, etc, which arose as part of the transition from the medieval to the modern world -- and the abandonment of the knightly ideal was part and parcel of that transition.

It's certainly an open question for me whether the knightly ideal was good in its time and place, or was always fundamentally problematic; I'd be open to the idea that when it arose and flourished it was an important, and indeed moral, value system. But in the modern world it tends to arise in fundamentally conservative realms where it is -- I would argue -- quite problematic, and frequently destructive.

In this regards, I would note that the American culture that was closest to the knightly ideal -- which placed enormous value on the virtues of honor, courage and fidelity, in knightly ways,

and which has in fact often been thought of as a chivalric culture -- was the culture of the upper classes of the antebellum white south, the "aristocratic" slaveholders.

There's a lot of nostalgia for that world in this country. (I think that a lot of conservatives -- who aren't the least bit racist personally, don't long for the restitution of slavery, or even Jim Crow, etc. -- don't realize the extent to which their values originate, historically, in that culture. Doesn't mean it isn't true.) I don't share it.

... And see, there, now I've gotten political. But that's the answer I can give you.

SF

brunians at brunians.org — 19 Sep 2007, 02:47 · in reply to Stephen Frug

May I inquire, gently, why you find the knightly ideal "troubling"?

I know that this opens me up to a (fully justifiable) charge of ducking an issue that I myself raised, but I don't want to get too far into this... largely because I don't think I can without getting into broad political (if not historical and moral) questions that are really off topic to Wolfe.

That's OK. We get off-topic all the time.

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Roy C. Lackey — 19 Sep 2007, 04:03 · follows brunians at brunians.org

First of all -- congratulations, Stephen! Such efforts are few and far between and too often get too little recognition. I liked the first three-fourths or so of your essay. The last part is more personal political rant than appropriate for a review, perhaps. I think that part detracts from the rest of it; but then it was written for a blog. Still, bravo!

Stephen Frug wrote:

Thus it's not answer to say that "perhaps something more complex is going on", or "Wolfe's narrators are sometimes unreliable": I think that you have to actually *argue* that in *this* case this is true *in ways relevant to my critiques*. Either make the case here, or present a link to another case.

I think this is true in all of the aspects of this argument.... but most especially in terms of a sentiment like "If you found the ethics to be problematic then perhaps the situations were intended to cause the reader to reflect on those problems.", where I not only made a textual case, but also pointed towards a lot of extra-textual evidence about Wolfe's views and intents.

Like you, I thought Able was an insufferable jerk, and said so a couple of years ago here in a number of posts. It didn't go over any better then. I pointed out even more instances than the captain's cabin bit where Able behaved very badly towards those who were ranked below knights in the social pecking order. Able never suffers any negative consequences for that behavior. The only times Able is made to suffer sanctions is when he offends someone of higher rank. And you are right that Wolfe, in TWK, does not seem to find fault with this system. I also called attention to Wolfe's Tolkien essay "The Best Introduction to the Mountains", wherein Wolfe seems to endorse the medieval social order.

Maybe we are both wrong on these points, but I have yet to see the proof.

Btw, it is "Able" not "Abel". You might want to fix that on your blog.

Again, congratulations!.

-Roy

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 19 Sep 2007, 10:12 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On Wed, 19 Sep 2007 03:45:03 +1000 Stephen Frug
<sfrug at post.harvard.edu> wrote:
Greetings Urthlings. I've read this message list before, but
never
posted to it. (Unless this message is itself a duplicate... the
first time seems to have gotten lost...) But I just wrote a long
review of Wizard Knight which I posted to my blog

Nice piece, thanks!

To enjoy Wolfe I generally have to hold my nose & swallow his political & religious assumptions whole, and then grit my teeth to deal with the crappy genre trappings - but having done that, it's usually worth it :)

I guess for me the most interesting point you raise is the one where you say: OK, fine, Wolfe's heroes may be pretty good characterisations of what counts as heroic for the kinds of societies they find themselves in. But how can a modern kid be excused for aspiring and acting as Able does?

Within the story, the answer is obvious. On one level, he's been programmed that way by Dsiri et al. They want him to win renown within the society of Celidon, where the martial virtues are absolutely predominant, so he can meet the king on equal-ish terms and deliver the message.

To induce him into this, he's been enchanted so that Dsiri is absolutely and entirely the most important thing for him, and to believe unquestioningly that gaining status in Celidon as a warrior is the only way to win her. He will stomp on anything which gets in his way, without regret. They've harnessed his adolescent hormones to turn him into a Clockwork Orange Lout Knight Wannabe.

So is Wolfe really holding out the knightly ideal as being a Good Thing? His hero character has been co-opted into following, without his consent, it by a creature of mud and twigs who is less than a dream ...

brunians at brunians.org — 19 Sep 2007, 10:46 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

You know, it's all very well to despise the martial virtues.

But the fact is that without them, you don't get to have any other virtues.

What idiot said 'Violence solves no problems'? Violence solves most problems, historically, and if it's mostly hidden away violence in modern society all that means is that people get to pretend that it isn't there, and indulge in fatuity.

.

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So is Wolfe really holding out the knightly ideal as being a Good Thing? His hero character has been co-opted into following, without his consent, it by a creature of mud and twigs who is less than a dream ...

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 19 Sep 2007, 12:00 · follows brunians at brunians.org

On Wed, 19 Sep 2007 20:46:27 +1000 brunians at brunians.org wrote:
You know, it's all very well to despise the martial virtues.

But the fact is that without them, you don't get to have any other virtues.

What idiot said 'Violence solves no problems'? Violence solves most problems, historically, and if it's mostly hidden away violence in modern society all that means is that people get to pretend that it isn't

there,
and indulge in fatuity.

I think a common theme in Wolfe has to do with the balance between the virtues of Aphrodite and Ares. They are, I think, his prime virtues, but an imbalance is a distortion. Aphrodite without Ares is ineffectual; Ares without Aphrodite is unjust.

Silk: too much Aphrodite, not enough Ares, until his joinder with Horn.

Able: too much Ares, not enough Aphrodite, until his ersatz love for Dsiri transmutes into the real thing, and expands beyond her.

I think TWK is quite clearly a critique of the ideal of chivalry to the extent it has strayed from its (purported but anyway ...) theoretical purpose of protecting the weak from oppression & become just an ideology buttressing a parasitical, closed, warrior elite.

When Able meets Uns and Duns, their mother (I think - don't have book here) briefly sketches the origins of knighthood. The men got together to protect people from ogres, giants and dragons. Somebody who did well at this was honored as a "knight". By the end of Wizard, Able has restored this original conception.

Matthew Groves — 19 Sep 2007, 17:15 · follows thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

Thanks, Stephen, for a thoughtful and honest post. I too welcome this sort of post, whether I agree or not, and I would like to see more of this kind of thing on the list.

I actually rejected The Knight in much stronger (and much simpler) terms the first time I read it. For some reason I didn't have the same viscerally negative reaction to Able's behavior. I guess I felt that the indistinctness of Able's memory of his pre-Mythgarthr self absolved him from the concerns of modern morality.

My own reaction was that Wolfe 1) completely failed to adequately portray the voice of the modern American teenager, and 2) had succumbed to that most regrettable peccadillo of fantasy fiction: adolescent wish-fulfillment. "How about I write a book about Conan, but he hangs out with Arthurian knights and Norse gods, and fights dragons and giants, and he has sexy elf slaves, and a magic bow, sword, helmet, cat, dog, and horse." I have only recently decided to take up Wizard Knight again, and I am really enjoying it at the level of the writing (as I always enjoy Wolfe), but I can't say that I've conclusively resolved any of the issues I had the first time.

Stephen Frug <sfrug at post.harvard.edu> wrote:
I think Wolfe's writing of Abel's voice was profoundly uneven.

As I said, I had the same reaction the first time I read it, but upon second reading, I don't know. It is so *blatantly* uneven and inconsistent. Surely anyone ought to know that no modern American teenager speaks like Abel. Either Wolfe is trying to say something about the stability of Abel's identity, or we have lost Wolfe to the ravages of senile dementia.

I think it may be that Abel was a teenager in the 40s like Wolfe, and that he grew up to live as an adult in the 21st century with Macs and everything (like Wolfe), before coming to Mythgarthr.

I don't have a very good argument that it is not merely a failure on Wolfe's part; my main argument is the patently inane and rightly dismissed, "It's Wolfe." But Able is so unconvincing as a modern American teenager, and Wolfe so flagrantly indulges Able in every possible magical friend, pet, adversary, and artifact, that it cries out for interpretation. I'm not saying I

have an interpretation that resolves these problematic aspects, and honestly if it were anyone but Wolfe I wouldn't waste my time.

I didn't read the whole interview with Gaiman, but I note in the excerpt you quoted that Wolfe doesn't explicitly argue that "a country where honor, courage, and fidelity actually mean something" would be some kind of Utopia. He does certainly imply that it would be better than things are now, and on that point I cannot disagree. Have you been out there recently? Talked to people? There's an insipid lowliness, a selfish meanness, and an absolving anonymity that pervade so much of our interactions and discourse at all levels. I think *these* obscenities are some of the things Wolfe is taking a stand on in WK.

Also, I think the world he proposes as an alternative to the modern view has less to do with actual historical medieval conditions and more to do with the imagined world of sword and sorcery and (his version of) *its* values.

Matt G.

Michael Straight — 19 Sep 2007, 17:28 · follows Matthew Groves

On 9/18/07, Stephen Frug <sfrug at post.harvard.edu> wrote:
had the writer stacking the deck for him at every turn. He had more magical allies, artifacts, assistants, companions, than you could shake a stick at: an invisible ogre doing his bidding! A sky-wolf who happened to be totally loyal! Elves (called Aelf) who were his slaves (yes, not always reliable, but often enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even becomes a god halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism!*

See, I think this is one of the more interesting things that Wolfe does with his protagonists. In most fantasy, the protagonist is weaker than all his enemies and the drama comes from struggling to overcome a stronger foe.

But in Wizard Knight (and many other of Wolfe's books) the protagonist is stronger than most of his foes and the drama comes from the moral dilemmas of how to wisely and honorably use that strength. I'd think this would be particularly compelling for someone who finds his reading colored by current geopolitical events, since is pretty much the circumstance in which the United States finds itself as a nation.

As for the feudal / knightly society. I don't think Wolfe admires it uncritically nor intends the reader to. I think there are some things he admires about that society and some things he doesn't, and that many of the places where you feel uncomfortable with it, you are supposed to.

I'd be interested in a discussion of what people think are the specific virtues that Wolfe does commend from that society which he thinks are lacking in ours and whether we agree with him about those virtues. That's what I'm going to be trying to pin down when I re-read the books.

Rostrum

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 20 Sep 2007, 02:51 · follows Michael Straight

On Thu, 20 Sep 2007 03:28:34 +1000 Michael Straight
<mfstraight at gmail.com> wrote:

See, I think this is one of the more interesting things that Wolfe

does with his protagonists. In most fantasy, the protagonist is weaker than all his enemies and the drama comes from struggling to overcome a stronger foe.

But in Wizard Knight (and many other of Wolfe's books) the protagonist is stronger than most of his foes and the drama comes from the moral dilemmas of how to wisely and honorably use that strength.

... which is probably one of the reasons why the stories sometimes might not seem to work so well as adventure stories. You're right of course: the heroes usually have the deck massively stacked in their favor. (IMO, Wolfe even verges on self-parody with stacking the deck for Able.)

The horns of the dilemma you mention are highlighted in a few places in TWK, I think.

- Riding through the plains of Jotunland Able has fantasies of leading a force of knights to make the place giant-rein.
- On Glas, he dreams of riding down from the sky to bring justice to Mythgathr (presumably by force), then being swallowed up by the earth.
- Setr tempting him with offers of crowns and empire.

This reminds me of one of the little puzzles we're left with: who actually does end up being King?

Bob Miller — 20 Sep 2007, 12:59 · in reply to Stephen Frug

But I think my biggest complaint -- my biggest stumbling block -- was a pair of intertwined issues: the character of Abel, and the ethics (even, politics) of the book.

First off, I found Abel frequently insufferable. Pompous, self-righteous, frequently a bully, he also came off as a Mary Sue (at least in one sense of that polyvalent term of fan critique): not only was he the most courageous and noble person about, but he also had the writer stacking the deck for him at every turn. He had more magical allies, artifacts, assistants, companions, than you could shake a stick at: an invisible ogre doing his bidding! A sky-wolf who happened to be totally loyal! Elves (called Aelf) who were his slaves (yes, not always reliable, but often enough). A magic sword, the blessing and friendship of Odin, various other magic devices he got at the end (the helmet, another sword). Heck, he even becomes a god halfway through the work! Talk about favoritism!*

This sort of stacking the deck is hard enough to take when the writer has some self-consciousness about what he's doing, but I didn't see any sign that Wolfe did. He simply loved his creation, and showered him with so many cheats and advantages that any honor he might have accrued felt like a cheat.

There are three things that I thank the group for forcing me to think of.

Even in the 14th century, the lack of knightly virtue was descried by no less than Chaucer himself. The Knight's battles and self represented an earlier, more ideal time. So, the knightly ideal was on a pedestal, a standard toward which to aspire.

Able started off pretty poor as an excuse for a human, yes. It was the narrator's "voice?" and the lack of justification of his actions that kept the reading road smooth for me. From the word

go I felt the narrator's voice promised growth. And that is what I liked so much about Abel. He was wrong. And he grew. From the trust and chance given by the Valfather he became more than he was--bullying brawler on one hand and sex slave to a creature of moss and twigs on the other.

And by his stepping up to the plate, his refusal to walk off toward the end of the Wizard and go to Aelfrice with Disiri leaving everyone and thing else, Wolfe has him give us the best portrayal of courage and knightly virtues I can imagine. No one other than Able and Disiri knew he had been tempted. Thought I would not say that Michael or the Valfather had not predicted it. Not to mention we get the smooth non-Irish cream of Wolfe's prose.

I thought the slow pace and acceleration was deliberate, and very reminiscent of the cavalry charge in Olivier's Henry V. Slow and accelerating and faster until they were at a full gallop. Perhaps Wolfe did somewhat commit what the great Algis Budrys called the sin of taking his audience for granted? The unevenness I acknowledge as well. I like it, I'm not a puzzle solver and these intervals give my rear brain time to catch up and help me understand what I read an hour or six ago.

I love this book. Able had so many gifts, and still he had to have outside help for his real accomplishment--saving humanity. He had no hope of winning against the Black Caan until Lothur "brought" the hundreds and food with Smiler and Able accepted his impending severing from Disiri to save those he would willingly have slain himself at the beginning of The Knight.

Thank you for making me think

Gear up for Halo? 3 with free downloads and an exclusive offer.
http://gethalo3gear.com?ocid=SeptemberWLHalo3_MSNHMTxt_1

Matthew King — 20 Sep 2007, 15:44 · in reply to Bob Miller

On Sep 20, 2007, at 7:59 AM, Bob Miller wrote:

From the trust and chance given by the Valfather he became more than he was--bullying brawler on one hand and sex slave to a creature of moss and twigs on the other.

Here's an odd thought: the story of Disiri and Able is directly parallel to that of Lara and Green in There Are Doors. The resemblance is strong enough that I think Wolfe was revisiting the idea.

The stories are very different, but this idea is fundamental to both: "goddess" unworthy of worship seduces an earthly male, who is thereafter bound to her, searching, faithful, and unrewarded.

In There Are Doors, Green is saved, in some sense, by becoming capable of love, even if only eros for an erotic pagan goddess.

In The Wizard Knight, Able's love is, at the end, able even to redeem Disiri.

Michael Straight — 20 Sep 2007, 16:21 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

On 9/19/07, thalassocrat at nym.hush.com <thalassocrat at nym.hush.com> wrote:

But in Wizard Knight (and many other of Wolfe's books) the protagonist

is stronger than most of his foes and the drama comes from the

moral
dilemmas of how to wisely and honorably use that strength.

... which is probably one of the reasons why the stories sometimes might not seem to work so well as adventure stories.

Yes. Exactly. Wolfe is not writing adventure stories. He's using the trappings of adventure stories to do other things.

Ever since Severian, Wolfe has almost rigorously skipped over every scene that would be the awesome action sequence in a standard adventure story.

the heroes usually have the deck massively stacked in their favor. (IMO, Wolfe even verges on self-parody with stacking the deck for Able.)

Standard fantasy is almost like a video game. The hero spends 6 books powering up and everything is carefully balanced so he's always just barely powerful enough to defeat his enemies. Then when he's got all the power-ups, he takes on the final boss and the story ends.

In Wizard Knight, Wolfe says, "You want a hero with cool power-ups? Great. You name it, this guy's got it. But now what? The story's just beginning."

(In one of the more popular recent fantasy computer games, Oblivion, the balancing seemed so ridiculous--no matter where you go, how much magic you have, how powerful you are or are not, the monsters are always just powerful enough to give you a challenge--that fans released a patch rewriting the game so that it was possible for a Level 70 character to run into minor monsters that are appropriately beneath the notice of such a demigod. So even the computer gamers yearn for something like what Wolfe is doing.)

Adam Stephanides — 21 Sep 2007, 18:40 · follows Michael Straight

Hello again, everyone. I haven't posted for a long time, for various reasons, but when I saw that this was a thread about Able's thuggishness, I couldn't resist. It's nice to see that even a couple of people remember my long-ago rant favorably.

Stephen Frug wrote:

Thus it's not answer to say that "perhaps something more complex is going on", or "Wolfe's narrators are sometimes unreliable": I think that you have to actually *argue* that in *this* case this is true *in ways relevant to my critiques*. Either make the case here, or present a link to another case.

I think this is true in all of the aspects of this argument.... but most especially in terms of a sentiment like "If you found the ethics to be problematic then perhaps the situations were intended to cause the reader to reflect on those problems.", where I not only made a textual case, but also pointed towards a lot of extra-textual evidence about Wolfe's views and intents.

I agree completely. And for what it's worth, I recall nothing in The Knight, or the portion of The Wizard that I read, to suggest that Wolfe finds Able's behavior towards his inferiors in The Knight objectionable.

I'd add a couple of things. First, while clearly we shouldn't automatically assume that Wolfe approves of his protagonists' behavior, nor should we assume that just because Wolfe shows a protagonist doing something we find immoral, he is being ironic.

Secondly, I wonder whether the "consensus" view of Wolfe places too much emphasis on the unreliability of Wolfe's narrators. In Peace and Fifth Head of Cerberus, Wolfe employs flagrantly

unreliable narrators; and there's a natural tendency to read his later novels in light of this. But looking at the later novels without preconceptions, I've never seen a convincing case for any of their narrators being unreliable to the extent that his/her words can't be trusted. (Silkhorn is unreliable regarding his own identity, but on no other point.) But the subject of the differences between the two early novels and the later ones deserves a post of its own.

The idea of Able as a Mary-Sue (the technical term for a male specimen is Gary-Stu) hadn't occurred to me, but it makes sense. It had crossed my mind that Able may have been wish-fulfillment on Wolfe's part. The short story "Golden City Far," which was first published around the same time as *The Knight iirc*, is even more obviously wish-fulfillment, to the point that I found it embarrassing. And there's no hint of parodic intent in that story, so I doubt that Able's Gary-Stu qualities are parodic.

--Adam

Matthew King — 21 Sep 2007, 19:28 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

On Sep 21, 2007, at 1:40 PM, Adam Stephanides wrote:

The short story "Golden City Far," which was first published around the same time as *The Knight iirc*, is even more obviously wish-fulfillment, to the point that I found it embarrassing. And there's no hint of parodic intent in that story, so I doubt that Able's Gary-Stu qualities are parodic.

But Bill, the hero of "Golden City Far", does not begin acting like Able when he becomes powerful. The relationship between the two may clinch the case for Wolfe portraying Able as morally problematic.

After browsing through GCF, I think it must have been written as a counterpoint to TWK. The closest thing to Ablean misbehavior that I could find in GCF is a brief fight between Bill and two upperclassmen. The older boys attack Bill because he is wearing a letter jacket they don't think he has earned the right to wear. Bill incapacitates them without hurting them badly.

Like Able, Bill has a talking dog and a magical sword. The letter jacket is a gift from an odd sort of supernatural fem, and it is a clear analog to Able's unofficial knighthood.

Unlike Able, Bill is humble, self-effacing even, and never seems threatened by people disbelieving in his stories. He resists the temptation of the superfem. He has a sense of humor: When someone is examining his sword and comments on the magical incantations inscribed in proto-Chaldean, he says, sotto voce, "Made in India".

David Duffy — 23 Sep 2007, 06:22 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

On Fri, 21 Sep 2007, Adam Stephanides wrote:

The idea of Able as a Mary-Sue (the technical term for a male specimen is Gary-Stu) hadn't occurred to me, but it makes sense. It had crossed my mind that Able may have been wish-fulfillment on Wolfe's part.

I think that TWK is written (as perhaps *The Devil in a Forest* is) as a traditional boys own adventure. It's supposed to be alluring to us young folks, didactic, and morally uplifting ;)

Able is a perfect knight within that milieu. Just as anyone in the military hierarchy does, he frequently teaches uppity inferiors a lesson or two (one might recall Severian then Roche? as chief of the apprentices).

David Duffy,

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 24 Sep 2007, 07:54 · follows David Duffy

On Thu, 01 Jan 1970 10:00:00 +1000 Adam Stephanides
<adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:

The idea of Able as a Mary-Sue (the technical term for a male specimen is Gary-Stu) hadn't occurred to me, but it makes sense. It had crossed my mind that Able may have been wish-fulfillment on

Wolfe's part. The short story "Golden City Far," which was first published around the same time as The Knight iirc, is even more obviously wish-fulfillment, to the point that I found it embarrassing. And there's no hint of parodic intent in that story,

so I doubt that Able's Gary-Stu qualities are parodic.

I think the Toug character puts a spike in this. He's pretty much Able minus the "power-ups", and if Wolfe had been indulging just in Gary-Stu-ism, I don't think he would have bothered with him.

OTOH, I think Wolfe would be a better writer if the Tougs and Horns were his main characters ...

Craig Brewer — 24 Sep 2007, 16:52 · in reply to David Duffy

On Able's morality, Wolfe did say in an interview that TWK was inspired as a traditional chivalric romance except without the Christian worldview of the Middle Ages. Instead, you get the harsher Norse aspect of the mythology.

To me, you can take that "without the Christian worldview" aspect in two ways. On the one hand, it looks like traditional "speculative fiction" in the sense of "what if" novels. (I.e., what if the romances of the middle ages had been written without Christianity.) Or, you can take it as a more subtle moral investigation of knight culture in which Able's troubled morality (or "bully" nature) is both necessary and inadequate to his society, etc.

Either way, I don't find Able to be in any way "worrying" as if it supposedly exposes Wolfe as idealizing the school yard bully. It seems to me that the two books offer much more for thought than whether or not we "like" the main character and can "sympathize" with him. If Wolfe chooses to write about a warlike society without any moral system that opposes the brutality of the sword, why should we react with shocked indignation when he gives us a character who is a product of that society? In many ways, I find TWK much more believable than most modern fantasy in which evil warlords run rampant and the main "good guy" somehow ends up being an innocent-eyed do-gooder who gets these ideas of freedom and kindness from seemingly nowhere in his quest to free the world of evil. If magic and knights were real (and socially dominant), then I expect the world would look

something like Mythgarthr.

Craig

Stanislaus — 24 Sep 2007, 19:44 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Hello Craig,

Monday, September 24, 2007, 6:52:41 PM, you wrote:
On Able's morality, Wolfe did say in an interview that TWK was inspired as a traditional chivalric romance except without the Christian worldview of the Middle Ages. Instead, you get the harsher Norse aspect of the mythology.

To me, you can take that "without the Christian worldview" aspect in two ways. On the one hand, it looks like traditional "speculative fiction" in the sense of "what if" novels. (I.e., what if the romances of the middle ages had been written without Christianity.) Or, you can take it as a more subtle moral investigation of knight culture in which Able's troubled morality (or "bully" nature) is both necessary and inadequate to his society, etc.

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...

Wizard-Knight is a Christian book, but it does have morality, even quite exacting one. This is a Neoplatonic book. Neoplatonism is usually thought of as the most subtle and difficult metaphysics. It entails also morality - but it is a morality very different from the Christian one. Neoplatonism is strictly hierarchical. In fact, the name "hierarchy" - which means "the holy authority" or "the holy rule" is strictly connected with that philosophy. Neoplatonism was the ruling philosophy and religion of the Roman Empire and, in a version Christianized by Pseudo-Dionysius, of Byzantium (although the Orthodox authors tend to condemn Neoplatonism in its pure version).

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism>

According to Neoplatonism the world was created as a series of emanations of the One; the description in the Wizard is close enough. Our task is to return to the One by ascending again the ladder of hierarchy; this can be done by mediation or by faithful service to the state (according to the pre-Neoplatonic astral piety as eg Somnum Scipionis of Cicero, the meritorious civil servants become the astral spirits, in fact - equal of gods).

The characteristic element was the wholly negative nature of evil. Evil does not have any independent existence; it is simply a lack of good, caused by the growing distance to the One. (the Lowest God of Wolfe is an addition in Christian style). Each lower level is further from the One, and therefore worse.

An important part is that there is nothing like forgiveness, charity etc. Those that are lower, are lower because they are worse; the higher are nearer to the One or to his earthly image, the

Emperor, and therefore are better. You can rise, best of all by philosophy or by service to the State, but if you do not, it is your own fault.

The Roman empire was organized exactly according to those rules. At top there was the Holy Emperor, below the hierarchy of offices glowing with His reflected light, below them the senatorial class, then the honestiores and at the end the humiliores, "humble ones" - serfs and indentured laborers.

Wizard-Knight shows therefore a very different culture with a different view of the world and different morality.

It is not very strange that any attempt to show anything different from the modern conceptions should cause a great deal of discomfort. It is a very well known fact that those who speak the most of "diversity", "free thought", "open mind" etc in practice cannot suffer any world-view which differs from their own. Since the world-view shown in Wizard-Knight is nearly a mirror image of the modern one, it is reasonable that it should be the most intolerable for modern people.

Additionally, it is rather clear that the author supports neither the pitiless hierarchy of Mythgarth, nor the lack of hierarchy in the modern society. The speech of Able to Arnthor obviously represents the view of the author. It is neither the love nor hate of hierarchy; it is rather a conventional Western and particularly American view of the world. In XIX century it would be an obvious and undisputable truth.

We can see that Wolfe wanted to show mistakes of modernity; but instead of writing about an ideal utopia, he had shown a society imbalanced in the opposite direction. This allows us to see both benefits and dangers inherent in both systems.

Obviously, if someone thinks that the courage, honor and fidelity are evil things, he will see not advantages in the Mythgarth; but this position starts from so different assumption that I think any discussion with it is impossible.

I will say only one thing. According to traditional Christian (and Neoplatonic) philosophy there are no evil things; everything which is, is good (even fidelity). But everything good can be perverted to evil. And the better thing is the worse it becomes if it is misused.

Contrary to modern view the good is infinitely stronger than evil (which is simply lack of good, not a separate thing). But if a very good thing is perverted it becomes very dangerous, and the less is the difference the more dangerous it is - since it retains much of the original good. And army of thieves and cowards is not very dangerous. An army of heroes commanded by experienced officers and serving a cruel madman is much more terrible.

Corruptio optimi pessima.

Corruption of the best is worst.

Best regards,
Stanislaus <mailto:sbocian@poczta.fm>

Zaplanuj i zrób to. Na pewno potrafisz!
Sprawdź >>> <http://link.interia.pl/f1bba>

Roy C. Lackey — 25 Sep 2007, 07:51 · follows Stanislaus

Stanislaus wrote:

According to Neoplatonism the world was created as a series of emanations of the One; the description in the Wizard is close enough. Our task is to return to the One by ascending again the ladder of hierarchy; this can be done by mediation or by faithful service to the state (according to the pre-Neoplatonic astral piety as eg Somnum Scipionis of Cicero, the meritorious civil servants become the astral spirits, in fact - equal of gods).<<

[snip]

An important part is that there is nothing like forgiveness, charity etc.

Those that are lower, are lower because they are worse; the higher are nearer to the One or to his earthly image, the Emperor, and therefore are better. You can rise, best of all by philosophy or by service to the State, but if you do not, it is your own fault.<<

That's a nice theory, but it doesn't fit the facts as sketched in TWK, as I pointed out two years ago.

The Aelf have no souls. When they die, they die *dead*. But for the sole possible exception of Disiri, when the Aelf die they cease to exist at all. (As does Mani, after his ninth death.) The Aelf will not rise again, to Mythgarthr or anywhere else.

The overwhelming majority of humans in Mythgarthr aren't going to rise to the next level, Skai, either. Only very few, the chosen slain, get to go to Skai. I don't know where, if anywhere, humans in Mythgarthr go when they die, but that is the way things are set up in the Seven Worlds cosmology of TWK.

To anticipate possible argument; I could make a case for the eventual humanization of the Aelf by way of human blood, but that would drag Christianity back into it. And even then, I find it rather difficult to imagine any significant portion of humanity ever getting picked to go to Skai. And it's harder yet to imagine the denizens of a Norse afterlife being on the career path to a Christian heaven.

-Roy

Phill Springett — 25 Sep 2007, 08:21 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Long time reader of the urth list, but not a poster until now.

I also found The Knight troubling in a similar way as was described originally by Stephen Frug, and although I own The Wizard I've yet to read it (but I will do).

Craig suggests

"If Wolfe chooses to write about a warlike society without any moral system that opposes the brutality of the sword, why should we react with shocked indignation when he gives us a character who is a product of that society?"

Which I find nothing to disagree with, and yet Wolfe makes it quite clear that Able is actually a product of _our_ society, and fits in quite well in Mythgarthr thank you very much, and rises up the ranks with indecent haste (almost as if he was born to it!). Is Wolfe making some point there?

Please note that I'm always very cautious with my views of Wolfe books, it normally takes me a couple of readings to begin to "get" his books, and I can't claim to really have got a good handle on The Knight yet.

Phill Springett

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-bounces at lists.urth.net [mailto:urth-bounces at lists.urth.net] On Behalf Of Craig

Brewer Sent: 24 September 2007 17:53 To: The Urth Mailing List; Adam Stephanides Subject: Re: (urth) Long Review Essay on Wizard Knight

On Able's morality, Wolfe did say in an interview that TWK was inspired as a traditional chivalric romance except without the Christian worldview of the Middle Ages. Instead, you get the harsher Norse aspect of the mythology.

To me, you can take that "without the Christian worldview" aspect in two ways. On the one hand, it looks like traditional "speculative fiction" in the sense of "what if" novels. (I.e., what if the romances of the middle ages had been written without Christianity.) Or, you can take it as a more subtle moral investigation of knight culture in which Able's troubled morality (or "bully" nature) is both necessary and inadequate to his society, etc.

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Craig

brunians at brunians.org — 25 Sep 2007, 09:29 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

The seven layer world is itself an afterlife.

It's similar to Dante's Purgatory, but not identical.

It is an afterlife to which has gone a decent kid (of, English, Norse and Irish descent, I believe) who is not a Christian. He's managed to write a letter to his brother by stimulating Gene to write this book.

Stanislaus wrote:

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-Roy

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 25 Sep 2007, 09:53 · follows brunians at brunians.org

On Tue, 25 Sep 2007 17:51:13 +1000 "Roy C. Lackey"
<rlackey at stic.net> wrote, inter alia:

I don't know where, if anywhere, humans in Mythgarthr go when they die ...

I thought it was fairly clear that they cross the Bridge of Swords into Hel's domain, unless they are specially favored.

But Sir Ravd threatens a villager with the prospect of Hel damning her to an afterlife in Muspel playing with dragons, if she perjures herself. So I guess that's an option also.

Also, there seems to be another hell-ish place apart from Muspel. Able says somewhere that he was "at the siege of Nastrond". Wikipedia says Nastrond was an afterlife punishment place for bad people of various descriptions. I assume in the TWK cosmos it's a region of Hel.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 25 Sep 2007, 17:29 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

On 9/25/07, brunians at brunians.org <brunians at brunians.org> wrote:

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Certainly an interesting theory, though I think you're wrong about the "stimulating Gene" part -- doesn't he say that he has seen Ben in Mythgarthr?

At any rate, it being an afterlife does explain some things, but it leaves others hanging. Can you elaborate?

FWIW, I didn't (and don't) see the worlds of the _Commedia_ in the Seven Layer World; I see the worlds of the Edda.

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I am miserable, he is miserable,

We are miserable.

Can't we have a party? Would he rather have a party?

brunians at brunians.org — 25 Sep 2007, 17:39 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On 9/25/07, brunians at brunians.org <brunians at brunians.org> wrote:

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Certainly an interesting theory, though I think you're wrong about the "stimulating Gene" part -- doesn't he say that he has seen Ben in Mythgarthr?

Might be. Don't remember.

Able definitely talks about writing Ben a letter.

At any rate, it being an afterlife does explain some things, but it leaves others hanging. Can you elaborate?

Not at this time. I think it is pretty obvious.

FWIW, I didn't (and don't) see the worlds of the _Commedia_ in the Seven Layer World; I see the worlds of the Edda.

On second thought, I agree that there is not really too strong a correlation between Dante and TWK. I don't think anyone is going to argue that TWK does not resemble the Edda.

.

Matthew King — 25 Sep 2007, 18:08 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

On Sep 25, 2007, at 12:39 PM, brunians at brunians.org wrote:

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Mythgarthr?

Might be. Don't remember.

Able definitely talks about writing Ben a letter.

In the opening of *The Knight*, Abel mentions seeing Ben by the fire on the battlefield, with no further explanation. The explanation only comes in the closing scenes of the *Wizard*, where the tarnhelm-ish thingy gives Abel the power to see things as they truly are. He looks at Bold Berthold and sees Ben.

At any rate, it being an afterlife does explain some things, but
it leaves
others hanging. Can you elaborate?

Not at this time. I think it is pretty obvious.

Because the dream of the ambulance means Arthur Ormsby is dead?

FWIW, I didn't (and don't) see the worlds of the *_Commedia_* in the
Seven Layer World; I see the worlds of the *Edda*.

On second thought, I agree that there is not really too strong a
correlation between Dante and TWK. I don't think anyone is going to
argue
that TWK does not resemble the *Edda*.

I like the idea that the entirety of the seven layer universe is Purgatory, but I don't think that is
what Wolfe had in mind.

brunians at brunians.org — 25 Sep 2007, 18:13 · in reply to Matthew King

On Sep 25, 2007, at 12:39 PM, brunians at brunians.org wrote:

It is an afterlife to which has gone a decent kid (of, English,
Norse and Irish descent, I believe) who is not a Christian. He's
managed to write a letter to his brother by stimulating Gene to write
this book.

Certainly an interesting theory, though I think you're wrong about
the "stimulating Gene" part -- doesn't he say that he has seen Ben in
Mythgarthr?

Might be. Don't remember.

Able definitely talks about writing Ben a letter.

In the opening of *The Knight*, Abel mentions seeing Ben by the fire on
the battlefield, with no further explanation. The explanation only
comes in the closing scenes of the *Wizard*, where the tarnhelm-ish
thingy gives Abel the power to see things as they truly are. He
looks at Bold Berthold and sees Ben.

Yes. Still, Able does talk about writing Ben a letter.

At any rate, it being an afterlife does explain some things, but
it leaves others hanging. Can you elaborate?

Not at this time. I think it is pretty obvious.

Because the dream of the ambulance means Arthur Ormsby is dead?

Yes, that was part of it.

I like the idea that the entirety of the seven layer universe is Purgatory, but I don't think that is what Wolfe had in mind.

Yeah, it's a neat idea. I don't any longer think that is what Wolfe had in mind either.

.

Michael Straight — 25 Sep 2007, 18:19 · in reply to Phill Springett

On 9/25/07, Phill Springett <Phill.Springett at dataconnection.com> wrote:
Which I find nothing to disagree with, and yet Wolfe makes it quite clear that Able is actually a product of _our_ society, and fits in quite well in Mythgarthr thank you very much, and rises up the ranks with indecent haste (almost as if he was born to it!). Is Wolfe making some point there?

Yes and no. There's that whole bit of stuff that happens to Able before Knight begins, after which he is something of a *tabla rasa*.

Able is from our world, but he seems to bring nothing from it to Mythgarthr. The only thing Wolfe really does with Able's our-worldly origins is make him unfamiliar with certain aspects of Mythgarthr. Able might as well be a Mythgarthr native with amnesia for all the difference it makes in what he brings personally to his adventures.

Rostrum

Matthew King — 25 Sep 2007, 19:25 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

On Sep 25, 2007, at 1:13 PM, brunians at brunians.org wrote:
Able definitely talks about writing Ben a letter.

In the opening of *The Knight*, Abel mentions seeing Ben by the fire on the battlefield, with no further explanation. The explanation only comes in the closing scenes of the Wizard, where the tarnhelm-ish thingy gives Abel the power to see things as they truly are. He looks at Bold Berthold and sees Ben.

Yes. Still, Able does talk about writing Ben a letter.

And *_The Wizard Knight_* is that letter, natch.

Wolfe's disbelief in the third person voice provides the constraints within which his genius flows.

Stanislaus — 25 Sep 2007, 20:36 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Hello Roy,

Tuesday, September 25, 2007, 9:51:13 AM, you wrote:
That's a nice theory, but it doesn't fit the facts as sketched in TWK, as I pointed out two years ago.

The Aelf have no souls. When they die, they die **dead**. But for the sole possible exception of Disiri, when the Aelf die they cease to exist at all. (As does Mani, after his ninth death.) The Aelf will not rise again, to Mythgarthr or anywhere else.

The overwhelming majority of humans in Mythgarthr aren't going to rise to the next level, Skai, either. Only very few, the chosen slain, get to go to Skai. I don't know where, if anywhere, humans in Mythgarthr go when they die, but that is the way things are set up in the Seven Worlds cosmology of TWK.

To anticipate possible argument; I could make a case for the eventual humanization of the Aelf by way of human blood, but that would drag Christianity back into it. And even then, I find it rather difficult to imagine any significant portion of humanity ever getting picked to go to Skai. And it's harder yet to imagine the denizens of a Norse afterlife being on the career path to a Christian heaven.

-Roy

Apokatastasis -the universal return to the Source, universal salvation - is often connected with Neoplatonism, but it is by no means a necessary part of it.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01599a.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apokatastasis>

Here is a quote from Plotinus on reincarnation:

<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol9/plotinus.htm>

"Those, then, who guarded the man in them, become men again. Those who lived by sense alone become animals [---]. But if they did not even live by sense along with their desires but coupled them with dullness of perception, they even turn into plants; [---] and they were taking care to turn themselves into trees. Those who loved music but were in other ways respectable turn into song-birds; kings who ruled stupidly into eagles, if they had no other vices; astronomers who were always raising themselves to the sky without philosophical reflection turn into birds which fly high. [---] but one who has a lesser share of it a creature that lives in community, a bee or something of the sort. Who, then, becomes a daimon? He who was one here too. And who a god? Certainly he who was one here. For what worked in a man leads him [after death]. Since it was his ruler and guide here too."

Neoplatonism doesn't teach that everyone will commune with God. To the contrary, this is the fate of the chosen few - the greatest philosophers. Those who have ascended to Skai (heroes and warriors) are nearer to the One than we, but the distance is still infinite.

The important point, however, is that everyone (that means all men, not all cats) could commune with God- if they do not, it is their own fault. If they suffer, it is their own problem.

In Wizard-Knight the Aelf are an equivalent of magical cats (only lower, of course). They have no souls, so there is no possibility of them ever ascending. Kulili, on the other hand, could do it, at least theoretically.

When Disiri receives her soul, she is created anew, as a categorically different creature. She can remember her previous life, certainly, but memory is not identity.

Best regards,
Stanislaus <mailto:sbocian@poczta.fm>

Fajne i smieszne. Zobacz najlepsze filmiki!

>>> <http://link.interia.pl/f1bbb>

Adam Stephanides — 26 Sep 2007, 21:45 · follows Stanislaus

On Sept. 24, 2007, Stanislaus wrote:
This is a Neoplatonic book.

How do you know this? I haven't read *The Wizard*, but I recall somebody writing on this list that each world but the topmost is basically made out of stuff rejected by the world above. That's more Gnostic, if anything, than Neoplatonist. And the Kabbalah, which at least we know Wolfe knows about, has an emanationist cosmology just as Neoplatonism does.

Neoplatonism was the ruling philosophy and religion of the Roman Empire and, in a version Christianized by Pseudo-Dionysius, of Byzantium (although the Orthodox authors tend to condemn Neoplatonism in its pure version).

What is your source for this? I've read a fair amount about the Roman Empire, and nothing I've read suggests anything like this; nor does the Wikipedia article you cite. In any case, Neoplatonism dates from the 3rd century A.D., while the Roman Empire was founded in the 1st century B.C. (and became Christianized in the 4th century A.D.).

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism>

...

An important part is that there is nothing like forgiveness, charity etc. Those that are lower, are lower because they are worse; the higher are nearer to the One or to his earthly image, the Emperor, and therefore are better. You can rise, best of all by philosophy or by service to the State, but if you do not, it is your own fault.

Again, nothing in the Wikipedia article, or in [this article](http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/neoplato.htm), which Wikipedia references, suggests that there is a single Neoplatonist morality, let alone that "there is nothing [in it] like forgiveness, charity etc." (which have nothing to do with Able throwing the captain out of his cabin, in any case), or that "good equals strong," to quote a later email of yours.

Additionally, it is rather clear that the author supports neither the pitiless hierarchy of Mythgarth, nor the lack of hierarchy in the modern society. The speech of Able to Arnthor obviously represents the view of the author. It is neither the love nor hate of hierarchy; it is rather a conventional Western and particularly American view of the world. In XIX century it would be an obvious and undisputable truth.

There's nothing American, or particularly 19th-century, about Able's speech. The notions that kings should be like fathers to their subjects, help and protect them, and not tax them excessively were commonplaces in medieval Europe. That commoners in bandit-infested frontier regions should be permitted to arm themselves and form companies of their own is more unusual, but not unknown: that's how the Cossacks got started, and the political systems of Imperial Russia and 19th-century America are about as far apart as you can get. None of this is incompatible with forcibly putting uppity commoners in their place. Notice that Able doesn't say that all commoners should be allowed to form armed companies, still less that they have a right to.

--Adam

Michael Straight — 27 Sep 2007, 16:03 · in reply to Matthew King

On 9/25/07, Matthew King <automatthew at gmail.com> wrote:
Wolfe's disbelief in the third person voice provides the constraints within which his genius flows.

I can't think of a better way to summarize the key worthwhile insight of postmodernism. There is no such thing as a third person perspective.

And I agree that Wolfe's embracing this insight is a cornerstone of his greatness.

Rostrum

Stanislaus — 27 Sep 2007, 17:59 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Hello Adam,

Wednesday, September 26, 2007, 11:45:49 PM, you wrote:

On Sept. 24, 2007, Stanislaus wrote:

This is a Neoplatonic book.

How do you know this? I haven't read The Wizard, but I recall somebody writing on this list that each world but the topmost is basically made out of stuff rejected by the world above. That's more Gnostic, if anything, than Neoplatonist. And the Kabbalah, which at least we know Wolfe knows about, has an emanationist cosmology just as Neoplatonism does.

Kabbalah is the Jewish version of Neoplatonism. For our purposes it is close enough.

As for Gnosis - there is a great difference. For Neoplatonism (and Kabbalah) the emanation of the world is a necessary process. The matter is comparatively much less good than spirit, but it is so because it is a very low emanation; there is nothing intrinsically evil in matter. It simply doesn't possess very much good.

For Gnostics the creation of the world is a terrible tragedy. An evil figure, the Demiurg, in his pride and will to dominate created an evil prison for souls.

There are a few Gnostic fantasy and sf books. The Long Sun trilogy is pretty obvious; less well known is "The Voyage to Arcturus" by Lindsay. If you want to see the difference between Gnosis and Neoplatonism, read it.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/vrctr10.txt>

Neoplatonism was the ruling philosophy and religion of the Roman Empire and, in a version Christianized by Pseudo-Dionysius, of Byzantium (although the Orthodox authors tend to condemn Neoplatonism in its pure version).

What is your source for this? I've read a fair amount about the Roman Empire, and nothing I've read suggests anything like this; nor does the Wikipedia article you cite. In any case, Neoplatonism dates from the 3rd century A.D., while the Roman Empire was founded in the 1st century B.C. (and became Christianized in the 4th century A.D.).

I blame Humanists. They liked only the Republic and the beginning of the Empire, and we must suffer the consequences. The late Empire is nearly unknown. But you can read some writings of Julian the Apostate, a Neoplatonist par excellence.

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/toj/index.htm>

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/julian-mispogon.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism>

...

An important part is that there is nothing like forgiveness, charity etc. Those that are lower, are lower because they are worse; the higher are nearer to the One or to his earthly image, the Emperor, and therefore are better. You can rise, best of all by philosophy or by service to the State, but if you do not, it is your own fault.

Again, nothing in the Wikipedia article, or in [this article](http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/neoplato.htm), which Wikipedia references, suggests that there is a single Neoplatonist morality, let alone that "there is nothing [in it] like forgiveness, charity etc." (which have nothing to do with Able throwing the captain out of his cabin, in any case), or that "good equals

strong," to quote a later email of yours.

....

--Adam

As to the pre-Christian morality, here is an interesting interview with Wolfe:

<http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfebj.html>

"JJ: That is an interesting perspective on it, I hadn't thought of at all. My wife had one of her professors that taught in a Moslem country for a while and said he woke up one day and saw the children had a bunch of kittens they were throwing up in the air and hitting them with a baseball bat against the wall and the mothers just sat by and watched. He said "I am not a Christian, I am an atheist, but I am a Christian in that I could not tolerate that." There has been an influence in our society that has made us different from pagans.

GW: We vastly underestimate the importance of Jesus. We think we don't. We have all these churches and we say how can we be underestimating Jesus? We don't until we start trying to figure out what it would be like if he had never lived. When you really start trying to figure out what it would be like if He never lived you realize that He is a much more pivotal figure than we give him credit for. All of these people, everybody at this convention is in that sense a Christian although most of them would tell you that they are not and some of them would tell them quite truthfully that they were Jews who practice Judaism in one of its various forms and so on and so forth. Nevertheless they have been influenced by Christ much more than they realized. We are very lucky to have had Him. We are very fortunate. A friend of mine learned to read Turkish. And he got hold of a Turkish joke book and read it. And I said, "What were the jokes like?" He said it was horrible. They were all about ugly tricks that were being played on blind people and things like that. This is what we have escaped from and we don't realize that it is there and we came very close to falling into it. We very easily could have and we still may."

Remember that for the Neoplatonists we live in the best of all possible worlds, and that this world is necessary.

If you want to know more about Neoplatonism, and especially Neoplatonism as it was reflected in the popular consciousness, I suggest two books by CS Lewis - "Discarded Mirror" and "Allegory of Love".

These are not philosophy books and are not primarily about Neoplatonism. They show however the popular worldview of late Antiquity and Middle Ages and are a necessary introduction to "Wizard-Knight".

Lewis explains one very important feature of Neoplatonism - the doctrine of mediation. Two beings from different levels cannot meet directly; they always need a mediator, a "tertium quid". That is the reason the hierarchy is so important. I cannot meet God directly, the best I can achieve is to see his reflection in my superior in the hierarchy - "the bright shadow" of Wolfe.

(Here, actually, Plotinus differs from the standard Neoplatonism, because he thought the direct mystical union with God possible.

http://home.uchicago.edu/~ajmazur/Unio_Magica_Part1.pdf

Zeke Mazur, Unio Magica, Part 1: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus? Mysticism,)

A good popular introduction is Arthur Lovejoy's "The Great Chain of Being".

See also:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Chain_of_Being

<http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/courses/re/chain.htm>

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-45>

Some more info

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.html> The works of Plotinus

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/neoplato.htm> a short, but very good, article in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

See also Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite "On the Divine Names".

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/rolt/dionysius.txt> <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/dionysius/works.txt>

Here is a fragment of the preface, written by the translator.

Keep in mind that Dionysius is an orthodox Christian, and the Wizard-Knight is not Christian, although in comparison with typical Neoplatonism it shows Christian influences. Super-Essence means God.

C. E. Rolt, Preface:

"Let us follow this creative process and see whither it leads. The Super-Essence, as It transcends both Non-Existence and Existence, also transcends both Time and Eternity. But from afar It is seen or felt as Existence and as Eternity.

....

Thus the world-process begins (as Dionysius had learnt from Genesis and from the teaching of Plato) as the level of dead solid matter, to which he gives the name of "merely existent" (ousi?d?s).

Thence, ... it advances to the production of plant and animal and man, being by the process enriched with more and more qualities as Life (autoz??), Wisdom (autosophia), and the other currents of the Universal stream begin to permeate it one by one.

Thus the separate individuals, according to the various laws (logoi) of their genera and species, are created in this world of Time. And each thing, while it exists in the world, has two sides to its existence: one, outside its created being (according to the sense of the word "outside" explained above), in the Super-Essence wherein all things are One Thing (as all points meet at infinity or as according to the neo-Platonic simile used by Dionysius, the radii of a circle meet at the centre), and the other within its own created being on this lower plane where all things are separate from each other (as all points in space are separate or as the radii of the circle are separate at the circumference). This paradox is of the very utmost importance.

The various kinds of existences being now created in this world of time, we can regard them as ranged in an ascending scale between Nothingness and the Super-Essence, each rank of being subsuming the qualities of those that lie below it. Thus we get the following system in ascending order: Existence, Life, Sensation, Reason, Spirit.

...

The diminution of Being which we find in glancing down the ladder is, Dionysius tells us, no defect in the system of creation. It is right that a

stone should be but a stone and a tree no more than a tree. Each thing, being itself however lowly, is fulfilling the laws of its kind which pre-exist (after a transcendent manner) in the undifferentiated

Super-Essence. If, however, there is a diminution of Being where such diminution has no place, then trouble begins to arise. This is, in fact, the origin and nature of evil. For as we ascend the scale of Being, fresh laws at each stage counteract the laws of the stage below, the law of life by which the blood circulates and living things grow upwards counteracting the mere law of inert gravitation, and again, the laws of morality counteracting the animal passions. And where this counter-action fails, disaster follows. A hindered circulation means ill-health, and a hindered self-control means sin. Whereas a stone is merely lifeless, a corpse is not only lifeless but dead; and whereas a brute is un-moral, a brutal man is wicked, or immoral.

What in the one case is the absence from a thing of that which has no proper place in it, is in the other case the failure of the thing's proper virtues.

....

IV.?THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

At wearisome length Dionysius discusses the problem of evil and shows that nothing is inherently bad. For existence is in itself good (as coming ultimately from the Super-Essence), and all things are therefore good in so far as they exist. Since evil is ultimately non-existent; a totally evil thing would be simply non-existent, and thus the evil in the world, wherever it becomes complete, annihilates itself and that wherein it lodges. We may illustrate this thought by the nature of zero in mathematics, which is non-entity (since, added to numbers, it makes no difference) and yet has an annihilating force (since it reduces to zero all numbers that are multiplied by it). Even so evil is nothing and yet manifests itself in the annihilation of the things it qualifies. That which we call evil in the world is merely a tendency of things towards nothingness. Thus sickness is a tendency towards death, and death is simply the cessation of physical vitality. And sin is a tendency towards spiritual death, which is the cessation of spiritual vitality. But, since the ground of the soul is indestructible, a complete cessation of its being is impossible; and hence even the devils are not inherently bad. Were they such they would cease ipso facto to exist.

Dionysius here touches incidentally on a mystical doctrine which, as developed by later writers, afterwards attained the greatest importance. This doctrine of a timeless self is the postulate, perhaps, of all Christian mysticism. The boldest expression of it is to be found in Eckhart and his disciple Tauler, who both say that even the lost souls in hell retain unaltered the ultimate nobility of their being. And lest this doctrine should be thought to trifle with grave matters, be it remembered that the sinfulness and gravity of sin are simply due to this indestructible nobility of our being. Man cannot become non-moral, and hence his capacity for wickedness. The soul is potentially divine, and therefore may be actually satanic. The very devils in hell cannot destroy the image of the Godhead within them, and it is this image that sin defiles.

It follows from the ultimate non-entity of evil that, in so far as it exists, it can only do so through being mingled with some element of good. To take an illustration given by Dionysius himself, where there is disease there is vitality, for when life ceases the sickness disappears in death. The ugliness of evil lies precisely in the fact that it always, somehow or other, consists in the corruption of something inherently good.

It is, however, this ugliness of things that Dionysius fails to emphasize, and herein lies the great weakness of his teaching. Not only does he, with the misguided zeal of an apologist, glose deliberately over certain particular cruelties of the Creation and accept them as finite forms of good, but also he tends to explain away the very nature of evil in itself. He tends to be misled

by his own true theories. For it is true that evil is ultimately non-existent. St. Augustine taught this when he said: "Sin is nought"; so did Julian of Norwich, who "saw not sin," because she believes "it hath no manner of substance nor any part of being." The fault of Dionysius is the natural failure of his mental type to grasp the mere facts of the actual world as mere facts. He is so dazzled with his vision of ultimate Reality that he does not feel with any intensity the partial realities of this finite universe. Hence, though his theory of evil is, in the main, true, he does not quite grasp the true application of his theory to this world of actual facts.

For this world is by its very nature finite. And hence, if the evil in it is (as Dionysius rightly says) but partial, it must also be remembered (as he for a moment forgets) that its very existence is but partial. And, therefore, though evil is ultimately non-existent, yet the bad qualities of things may, so far as this present world is concerned, have as much reality, or at least as much actuality, as their good qualities. And when we say that evil is ultimately non-existent we merely mean that evil ought to have no actuality here, not that it has none. Dionysius calls evil a lapse and failure of the creature's proper virtues. But a lapse or failure has in it something positive, as he in the same breath both admits by using the word and also tries to explain away. It is as positive as the virtues from which it lapses. The absence of a wooden block is nothing, light has no proper place there, but the air, where light should be, is darkness and is a visible shadow. St. Augustine has crystallized this truth in his famous epigram, quoted above in part, which runs in full as follows: "Sin is naught, and men are naughtes when they sin." The void left by the want of a good thing has a content consisting in the want. Probably had Dionysius seen more of the world's misery and sin he would have had a stronger sense of this fact. And in that case he would have given more prominence than he gives, in his extant writings at least, to the Cross of Christ."

I hope those resources will help you understand the problem.

Best regards,
Stanislaus <mailto:sbocian@poczta.fm>

-----R--E--K--L--A--M--A-----
Lepsze wiadomości z kraju i z zagranicy.
Nie wierzysz? Sprawdź - <http://wiadomosci.interia.pl/>

Matthew King — 27 Sep 2007, 21:03 · in reply to Michael Straight

On Sep 27, 2007, at 11:03 AM, Michael Straight wrote:

Wolfe's disbelief in the third person voice provides the constraints within which his genius flows.

I can't think of a better way to summarize the key worthwhile insight of postmodernism. There is no such thing as a third person perspective.

Have any of the po-mos written about the evolution of the idea of the third person?

Michael Straight — 28 Sep 2007, 17:29 · in reply to Matthew King

On 9/27/07, Matthew King <automatthew@gmail.com> wrote:
Wolfe's disbelief in the third person voice provides the constraints within which his genius flows.

I can't think of a better way to summarize the key worthwhile insight of postmodernism. There is no such thing as a third person perspective.

Have any of the po-mos written about the evolution of the idea of the third person?

I don't know. It seems pretty ancient. The first few chapters of Genesis are basically third-person omniscient. And I can't help thinking that we'd have been spared a lot of headache if they weren't.

Rostrum