

Graves etc. (was: A Cabin on the Coast)

The Urth list — 9 messages, 6 voices, 17 Jan 2008

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4973>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Matthew Groves — 17 Jan 2008, 07:39

On Jan 16, 2008 5:04 PM, Matthew Keeley <matthew.keeley.1 at gmail.com> wrote:
I saw your "Interpreting Wolfe" list on Amazon; I see you put The White Goddess on that too. It's one of those things I've been meaning to read for a while, and learning it's influenced by Wolfe makes me want to read it more. <snip>

I'm glad you found that Amazon list. I've been creating for myself a course in Wolfe-related readings, trying to fill in the vast holes in my very pragmatic public school education.* The list on Amazon is one product of that course. I've been altering it now and then as I find new books and reject some less helpful or less interesting ones.

There's no doubt in my mind that Wolfe has read The Golden Bough at least in abridged form, along with Joseph Campbell's works. Also, The Golden Bough is the basis for much of Graves's work in The White Goddess. (But I suggest you read Graves not as if it were anthropology or even comparative mythology, but as fantasy. Fantasy non-fiction. That's how I have to read it. It's too improbable for me to read it as scholarship.)

I'm sure others can speak more knowledgeably about Graves than I can. I have found The White Goddess to be very difficult, slow going, particularly since I have almost no background in the things he's talking about (sometimes I don't even know what he's talking about).**
The thing in Pirate Freedom that suggests Graves's influence is the relationship between Chris/Ignacio*** and Novia.**** I think this relationship is one of Wolfe's versions of / reactions to Graves's "Single Poetic Theme", which Graves summarizes thus:

"The Theme, briefly, is the antique story ... of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride, and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird."

So the Theme is a cyclical one (reflecting the year cycle, the sowing and reaping of grain), a loop like the plot of Pirate Freedom. The advent of genetic cloning affords an sf trope on this ancient myth.

While it has been a terribly difficult read for me, I would encourage you to read The White Goddess, if for no other reason than that it has been tough going alone, and might be instructive and interesting to discuss it on the list. I think it would be interesting to work out where its influence on Wolfe appears, and how Wolfe's own interests and beliefs, particularly his Catholicism, lead him to deviate from this Single Poetic Theme.

* I'm tempted to rant here about the state of public education in the US -- and how, however much we are behind in math and science, we are ten times worse in our neglect of the humanities.

** I suppose what I need now is a reading list for understanding Graves's The White Goddess, but I'm presently unwilling to go there.

*** and perhaps extending to Se or Guzman and Chris's child.

**** and maybe Estrellita? Azuka? Pinkie?

Roy C. Lackey — 18 Jan 2008, 05:22 · follows Matthew Groves

I wrote:

I vowed at the time Marc Aramini posted what Wolfe really had to say about _The White Goddess_ that I was going to post a link to that post every time someone raised the specter of _The White Goddess_ and its supposed influence on Wolfe. I can't seem to find it now, so it must be in the year of lost archives. Could you send it again, Marc?

Well, Marc didn't answer, but I'm not the only one to remember that post. Thanks to Tony Ellis, I am able to append it here. The post is, indeed, in the lost year of archives. I know it upsets many long-held and cherished theories of Wolfe interpretation, which is probably why it has been widely forgotten, but it bears repeating.

-Roy

from aramini1 at cox.net
to urth at urth.net,
date May 22, 2004 12:09 AM
subject (urth) wolfe's comments on a few texts

I asked Mr. Wolfe about a few books which have come up under discussion on the list as possible sources for his work. I thought some of us would be interested in his response, so I'll quote it. Keep in mind that I asked his opinion about the books, so he is just answering my questions.

"You asked about some books. I haven't read KING JESUS. I read enough of THE WHITE GODDESS (which is still around here somewhere) to conclude that Graves, with all his talent, was a crackpot. Have you read I, CLAUDIUS? Or HERCULES MY SHIPMATE? They're fine, fine books, both of them. I read one book by Mary Renault; I'm no longer sure of the title. It bored me halfway to madness, and I've never tried anything else."

I thought that was interesting.

Marc Aramini

Matthew Groves — 18 Jan 2008, 23:09 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On 1/17/08, Roy C. Lackey <rlackey at stic.net> wrote:

I know it upsets many long-held and cherished theories of Wolfe interpretation, which is probably why it has been widely forgotten, but it bears repeating.

-Roy

"I read enough of THE WHITE GODDESS (which is still around here somewhere) to conclude that Graves, with all his talent, was a crackpot."

"Upsets" nothing! Wolfe fans rejoice; you don't have to read The White Goddess! Philosophically, TWG is pretty much diametrically opposed to Wolfe anyway, TWG being in part a sort of lamenting of the great apostasy that is the shift from worship of the Goddess to Judeo-Christian worship.

I do recommend Graves's book on the Greek myths -- very handy for the etymology of names. But it sounds like Frazer's The Golden Bough is probably a better source Wolfe's reception of comparative mythology and religion.

Matthew Keeley — 18 Jan 2008, 23:38 · in reply to Matthew Groves

I do recommend Graves's book on the Greek myths -- very handy for the etymology of names. But it sounds like Frazer's The Golden Bough is probably a better source Wolfe's reception of comparative mythology and religion.

Not that Frazer is much closer to Wolfe's views - he was very critical of Christianity. Parts of the Golden Bough are direct attempts to undermine Christian beliefs. Alas, I doubt any of us will read the whole thing - it's about thirteen volumes, and the only readily-available print version is the Oxford University Press abridgment (which is still 800 pages long). Frazer's own two-volume abridgment is out-of-print and apparently doesn't have some of the most interesting and controversial material. The abridgment is available online at Project Gutenberg though:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3623>

Do check it out. Unlike The White Goddess, Frazer is fun to read.

-Matt

Marc Aramini — 19 Jan 2008, 04:24 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

sorry roy, hadn't checked my email for a few days.

Yes, I was about to post something to that effect - Wolfe is a reader of fiction, and while he researches his novels, I think we would be surprised to note how much time he has spent exclusively writing rather than amassing a huge collection of esoteric and obscure books that he peruses in his infinite time.

I think he once told me he hadn't gotten far in War and Peace, nor read the entirety of Brothers Karamazov. However, to be fair, he has certainly read all of Dickens and Proust and Herodotus and Chesterton, and the other obvious influences.

But you don't have to have read everything to be a great creator, eh?

--- "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net> wrote:
I wrote:

I vowed at the time Marc Aramini posted what Wolfe really had to say about _The White Goddess_ that I was going to post a link to that post every time someone raised the specter of _The White Goddess_ and its supposed influence on Wolfe. I can't seem to find it now, so it must be in the year of lost archives. Could you send it again, Marc?

Well, Marc didn't answer, but I'm not the only one to remember that post. Thanks to Tony Ellis, I am able to append it here. The post is, indeed, in the lost year of archives. I know it upsets many long-held and cherished theories of Wolfe interpretation, which is probably why it has been widely forgotten, but it bears repeating.

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 19 Jan 2008, 06:12 · follows Marc Aramini

Matthew Groves quoted and wrote:
I know it upsets many long-held and cherished theories of Wolfe interpretation, which is probably why it has been widely forgotten, but it bears repeating.

-Roy

"I read enough of THE WHITE GODDESS (which is still around here somewhere) to conclude that Graves, with all his talent, was a crackpot."

"Upsets" nothing! Wolfe fans rejoice; you don't have to read The White Goddess!

I wouldn't discourage anyone from reading TWG -- I've read it several times myself, decades ago. It has a certain appeal, even fascination, for young males of a certain poetic bent; but Lupine it ain't.

Philosophically, TWG is pretty much diametrically opposed to Wolfe anyway, TWG being in part a sort of lamenting of the great apostasy that is the shift from worship of the Goddess to Judeo-Christian worship.

Right. Which is why I was decrying it as a source for interpreting Wolfe long before I knew that Wolfe hadn't even finished reading it. But if you look through the archives you will be amazed at how often someone cites TWG as justification for some theory or other about understanding Wolfe. It's been done with KING JESUS, too. And people become strident in defense of the indefensible. (Rant stifled.)

I do recommend Graves's book on the Greek myths -- very handy for the etymology of names.

Alice K. Turner once posted her comments on that book and some on TWG that might be of interest.

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0304/3337.txt.shtml>

-Roy

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com — 19 Jan 2008, 06:50 · follows Roy C. Lackey

On Sat, 19 Jan 2008 15:24:06 +1100 Marc Aramini
<marcaramini at yahoo.com> wrote:
sorry roy, hadn't checked my email for a few days.

Yes, I was about to post something to that effect -
Wolfe is a reader of fiction, and while he researches
his novels, I think we would be surprised to note how
much time he has spent exclusively writing rather than
amassing a huge collection of esoteric and obscure
books that he peruses in his infinite time.

I think he once told me he hadn't gotten far in War
and Peace, nor read the entirety of Brothers
Karamazov. However, to be fair, he has certainly read
all of Dickens and Proust and Herodotus and
Chesterton, and the other obvious influences.

But you don't have to have read everything to be a
great creator, eh?

Some people seem to think it would have been a good thing if Wolfe had intended to rewrite
Graves, Nabokov, Dostoyevsky, Borges, Joyce, Dante, The Green Knight, Parsifal, The Magus etc
etc etc.

I've never really understood that. Apart from anything else, I get the impression that Wolfe
thinks he can do a lot better than most of these supposed models.

JWillard — 26 Jan 2008, 02:19 · in reply to thalassocrat at nym.hush.com

thalassocrat at nym.hush.com wrote:
On Sat, 19 Jan 2008 15:24:06 +1100 Marc Aramini
<marcaramini at yahoo.com> wrote:
sorry roy, hadn't checked my email for a few days.

Yes, I was about to post something to that effect -
Wolfe is a reader of fiction, and while he researches
his novels, I think we would be surprised to note how
much time he has spent exclusively writing rather than
amassing a huge collection of esoteric and obscure
books that he peruses in his infinite time.

I think he once told me he hadn't gotten far in War
and Peace, nor read the entirety of Brothers
Karamazov. However, to be fair, he has certainly read
all of Dickens and Proust and Herodotus and
Chesterton, and the other obvious influences.

But you don't have to have read everything to be a

great creator, eh?

Some people seem to think it would have been a good thing if Wolfe had intended to rewrite Graves, Nabokov, Dostoyevsky, Borges, Joyce, Dante, The Green Knight, Parsifal, The Magus etc etc etc.

I've never really understood that. Apart from anything else, I get the impression that Wolfe thinks he can do a lot better than most of these supposed models.

Matthew Keeley — 26 Jan 2008, 03:04 · in reply to JWillard

Forgive me if I step away from the dark ages. If anyone is still in charge, please remove me from this list.

<http://listserver.dreamhost.com/listinfo.cgi/urth-urth.net>

Info on unsubscribing at the bottom of the page.

So long then?

-Matt