

AEG: Is AEG Lovecraftian?

The Urth list — 9 messages, 8 voices, 03 Nov 2008

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5204>

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.

Kieran Mullen — 03 Nov 2008, 17:59

(I have sent this in several times and I never saw it on the list or on the webserver. I am resending it. I apologize if it appears more than once.)

A very good friend of mine who has written books on horror films and fiction recent finished "An Evil Guest." It was quite a slog for him

- he found Cassie to be an unappealing protagonist and the pastiche of genres annoyed him. However, his biggest complaint was that the book is billed as Lovecraftian horror and it simply isn't.

That needs a bit of explanation. For a work to be Lovecraftian I don't think it is simply sufficient to stick in Hastur and Cthulu and call it that. Lovecraft (IMO) came up with a truly original ontological horror premise for his fiction: the universe is dominated by inhuman forces which we don't have a hope of understanding or defeating. At best we can only hope that they ignore us. (We can't even pray that they do - there is no God, only atoms and a void). Humanity is a minor irrelevance in a dark and hungry universe. Any attempt to try to change that will only draw the attention of forces that will destroy the inquirer.

AEG dabbles in many pulp genres without really investing in any single one: the rising theatrical star, the hard-boiled detective, the South Sea adventure, and (in this view), Lovecraftian horror. On the other hand, it may actually have a more horrifying subtext than I understand, if the reality-warping effects of Cassies "elevation" are meant to show that reality is not what we know it to be. I am not sure how the last fifty pages of the novel demand a re-interpretation of the first parts. Otherwise, it seems that the Lovecraft elements at the end are tacked on, and not essential to the earlier parts of the novel.

So what do you think? Is AEG just a romp through different genres or is it really meant to be a horror novel?

Kieran Mullen

Dave Tallman — 03 Nov 2008, 20:55 · in reply to Kieran Mullen

Kieran Mullen wrote:

That needs a bit of explanation. For a work to be Lovecraftian I don't think it is simply sufficient to stick in Hastur and Cthulu and call it that. Lovecraft (IMO) came up with a truly original ontological horror premise for his fiction: the universe is dominated by inhuman forces which we don't have a hope of understanding or defeating. At best we can only hope that they ignore us. (We can't even pray that they do - there is no God, only atoms and a void). Humanity is a minor irrelevance in a dark and hungry universe. Any attempt to try to change that will only draw the attention of forces that will destroy the inquirer.

Given that Wolfe is a Christian I doubt very much that he would write a work consistent with such a nihilistic Lovecraftian premise. But other writers, such as August Derleth (also a Christian), have expanded the Lovecraft universe to include a more classical view of good vs. evil. To me, true horror cannot exist in a universe where our ideas of sanity and goodness are a mere fluke, a cosmic joke. The efforts of the protagonists become simply silly.

But I don't think the Lovecraft parts are simply tacked on. From the beginning Reis announced his intention to retire to the South Seas (p.

14). This cannot be a coincidence. Reis may have learned something during his time as ambassador to Woldercan. He may have realized there was a connected menace on Earth and determined to fight it. To some degree his provoking a fight between Squiddy and the Navy seems to have been a success. At the very least the storms took out many Cthulhu worshipers on the neighboring islands.

Even Lovecraft allowed the forces of good to succeed sometimes, for example in "The Dunwich Horror." Even he could not help rooting for humanity against the monsters.

Adam Thornton — 03 Nov 2008, 21:11 · in reply to Dave Tallman

On Nov 3, 2008, at 2:55 PM, Dave Tallman wrote:

Even Lovecraft allowed the forces of good to succeed sometimes, for example in "The Dunwich Horror." Even he could not help rooting for humanity against the monsters.

One can make the argument that "The Dunwich Horror" is like that precisely *because* it is a Machen pastiche, and Arthur Machen was a Christian who did not share the Lovecraftian view of the world. That, indeed, is exactly Ken Hite's argument.

Adam

Bryan Alexander — 03 Nov 2008, 22:10 · in reply to Dave Tallman

I admit to bringing a Lovecraftian perspective to my reading of AEG. That was due in part to various things I'd heard about the novel, which were then brought to mind with the HPL inscription. So I suspected far more cosmic horror from various quarters, including the flapping creature, than I ended up with. My Phil Dick-style expectations were confirmed instead.

On Mon, Nov 3, 2008 at 3:55 PM, Dave Tallman <davetallman at msn.com> wrote:
Kieran Mullen wrote:

That needs a bit of explanation. For a work to be Lovecraftian I don't think it is simply sufficient to stick in Hastur and Cthulu and call it that. Lovecraft (IMO) came up with a truly original ontological horror premise for his fiction: the universe is dominated by inhuman forces which we don't have a hope of understanding or defeating. At best we can only hope that they ignore us. (We can't even pray that they do - there is no God, only atoms and a void). Humanity is a minor irrelevance in a dark and hungry universe. Any attempt to try to change that will only draw the attention of forces that will destroy the inquirer.

Given that Wolfe is a Christian I doubt very much that he would write a work consistent with such a nihilistic Lovecraftian premise. But other writers, such as August Derleth (also a Christian), have expanded the Lovecraft universe to include a more classical view of good vs. evil. To me, true horror cannot exist in a universe where our ideas of sanity and goodness are a mere fluke, a cosmic joke. The efforts of the protagonists become simply silly.

But I don't think the Lovecraft parts are simply tacked on. From the beginning Reis announced his intention to retire to the South Seas (p. 14). This cannot be a coincidence. Reis may have learned something during his time as ambassador to Woldercan. He may have realized there was a connected menace on Earth and determined to fight it. To some degree his provoking a fight between Squiddy and the Navy seems to have been a success. At the very least the storms took out many Cthulhu worshipers on the neighboring islands.

Even Lovecraft allowed the forces of good to succeed sometimes, for example in "The Dunwich Horror." Even he could not help rooting for humanity against the monsters.

Nigel Price — 04 Nov 2008, 00:04 · follows Bryan Alexander

Kieran Mullen asks...

So what do you think? Is AEG just a romp through different genres or is it really meant to be a horror novel?

No, I don't think that AEG is a Lovecraftian horror story in the sense that you define. As far as I understand - which is not very far at all - it borrows some Lovecraftian elements, but does not share their underlying philosophy, their "ontological horror premise" (great phrase!).

I've read back through all the posts here on AEG and I've reread bits of the story but I still don't really understand how all the parts of the book fit together. I'm trying to work it out. The nature of Gideon Chase seems to be key. That in turn, because Gideon was born there and is probably a human-Woldercanese hybrid, is tied up with the moral status of the planet Woldercan.

Wolfe depicts Woldercan as a place which has talking fish, dangerous forests, alchemy and different physics. The inhabitants superficially resemble humans but are subtly different. They can breed successfully with lower animals, including humans, and male Woldercaners try to seduce and mate with human females. All in all, Woldercan sounds more like Fairyland than a conventional science fiction alien planet. If it is a sort of SF Fairyland, that would make the Wolders fairies, or fairy analogues anyway.

The moral status of fairies and Fairyland is moot in the European tradition. Sometimes they are morally equivalent to humans, with the "good" and "bad" fairies familiar in children's stories. Often, though, they are depicted as being amoral and "other", outside human schemes of morality and, when their stories get merged with the Christian tradition, outside the divine scheme of salvation.

Yet another tradition, evident in stories like that of Tam Lin and some versions of Thomas the Rhymer, has Fairyland as a subsidiary dominion of Hell to which it pays tax (usually every seven years) in the form of human souls. Fairies in this tradition become similar to devils or demons.

In the opening chapter of AEG, Gideon tells the President that there is no such thing as good and evil. His position seems to be that there is no such thing as absolute good or evil, only things that we ourselves disapprove of. If he means that no person is ever wholly good or wholly evil, he must surely be right. If he means that good and evil do not themselves exist, then, from Wolfe's perspective as a Christian, he must surely be wrong. He seems to mean both, which is confusing!

Gideon's perspective is either that of an amoral alien, analogous to the amoral fairies I described above, with no human sense of good or evil, or he himself is evil and is deceiving others with his untruths, which makes him more of the "demonic" type of alien/fairy.

Wolfe has stated in interviews that his starting point for AEG was the idea of a detective who was a wizard. Gideon is a wizard, and certainly the archetypal wizard, Merlin, is half-human and half-devil in some accounts of his parentage.

By this account, Gideon is at best amoral and at worst positively evil.

At the start of AEG, the President of the United States attempts to recruit Gideon to work with the FBI in catching Bill Reis. In many stories, certainly in the 1930s pulp stories which Wolfe is pastiching, this would make Gideon the good guy, an untouchable science fictional Eliot Ness. But there's a strong element of satire in AEG. The USA over which the President presides is a place where abortion has become legalised child murder, and where the various federal agencies fight an endless turf war against each other, possibly under the manipulative influence of demonic submarine aliens. The moral status of the President in this story is pretty cloudy, especially as we later come to see that Bill Reis himself may be far from being the evildoer the President claims. As the President's agent, Gideon's moral status is equally suspect.

That's at the start of the story. Does Gideon change?

I'm not clear in my own mind whether Bill Reis starts off bad but is changed by the transforming power of his love for Cassie, or whether he was always good and it just takes Cassie and the reader a long time to find the correct moral orientation within the confusing landscapes of AEG. I think that there's at least an element of the former because Bill Reis learned his alchemy and other tricks on the morally dubious Woldercan.

Either way, Gideon's transforms Cassie into a star (her name, after all, is that of an astronomical star) and it's her loveliness which captures both Gideon and Bill Reis' hearts. Somehow, this love helps to orientate all three of them. Cassie chooses to marry Bill and Gideon goes to work for him, although he doesn't seem to break his agreement with the President so much as suspend it.

That seems to be one half of the story. Bill is inspired to self-sacrifice, Cassie loves the Christ-like Bill and Gideon is working, at least for the moment, for the good guys. Gideon may have transformed Cassie into a star in order to trap Reis, but the her power of beauty has transformed all three of them for the better.

But the other half of the story seems to involve putting the bad guys into a properly inverted hierarchy of wickedness.

Cassie's story of how she came to love the neighbour's dog is instructive in this context. Scared of the neighbour's dog but even more scared of her violently abusive father, she finds herself sheltering with the animal and accepting its protection. Her clear perception of the greater source of danger enables her to accept the dog just as she later accepts the help of the bat creatures which would otherwise have terrified her in order to escape the agents of the evil Storm God.

The US Navy act as agents of the bad American President and pursue Bill Reis for his gold. Reis uses that gold, however, to direct them against the Squid God. If the US President, his navy and

other agencies are not made virtuous as such, they are at least properly directed against the greater evil of the malevolent underwater alien.

I still don't fully understand the ending. Why does Gideon return to Woldercan? Because it is his true home? Perhaps it's because the spell of Cassie's star quality has been broken and without it he has fallen from virtue back to his old immoral/amoral ways. I don't know what Cassie is looking for.

As an allegory, AEG is confusing. But I don't think it is an allegory any more than it's Lovecraftian horror. It uses allegory, or has an allegorical dimension, but there's a lot more going on and the correspondences between characters and qualities seem to be dynamic rather than static.

Nigel

Dan — 04 Nov 2008, 03:21 · follows Nigel Price

At 07:08 PM 11/3/2008, you wrote:

Message: 5

Date: Tue, 4 Nov 2008 00:04:01 -0000

From: "Nigel Price" <nigelaprice at talktalk.net>

Subject: (urth) AEG: Is AEG Lovecraftian?

To: "Urth List" <urth at lists.urth.net>

Message-ID: <AFEFKBJKJDDJOMBACBNCEENDNAA.nigelaprice at talktalk.net>

Content-Type: text/plain; charset="iso-8859-1"

Kieran Mullen asks...

So what do you think? Is AEG just a romp through different genres or is it really meant to be a horror novel?

No, I don't think that AEG is a Lovecraftian horror story in the sense that you define. As far as I understand - which is not very far at all - it borrows some Lovecraftian elements, but does not share their underlying philosophy, their "ontological horror premise" (great phrase!).

I would agree. The flaps/panels really try to sell this as one and it disappointingly is not. Better to have not mentioned HPL tidbits at all and left them as a pleasant surprise for the reader.

At the start of AEG, the President of the United States attempts to recruit Gideon to work with the FBI in catching Bill Reis.

If you reread, they want to do this to learn of his stealth technique. Regardless, they want to kill him.

In many stories, certainly in the 1930s pulp stories which Wolfe is pastiching, this would make Gideon the good guy, an untouchable science fictional Eliot Ness. But there's a strong element of satire in AEG. The USA over which the President presides is a place where abortion has become legalised child murder, and where the various federal agencies fight an endless turf war against each other, possibly under the manipulative influence of demonic submarine aliens. The moral status of the President in this story is pretty cloudy, especially as we later come to see that Bill Reis himself may be far from being the evildoer the President claims. As the President's agent, Gideon's moral status is equally suspect.

That's at the start of the story. Does Gideon change?

No. He learns of Reis' technique and orchestrates his death despite being employed by him. Despite his declarations of love etc for Cassie, he does nothing to rescue her at the end, contact her (his ethermail was in response to her own) to discover her well being or as far as we know pay her the 80k he still owes her. The end implies she met with him but it is apparent he does little or nothing to help her bring back Bill.

I'm not clear in my own mind whether Bill Reis starts off bad but is changed by the transforming power of his love for Cassie, or whether he was always good and it just takes Cassie and the reader a long time to find the correct moral orientation within the confusing landscapes of AEG. I think that there's at least an element of the former because Bill Reis learned his alchemy and other tricks on the morally dubious Woldercan.

Reis told her he planned to destroy her until she rode with him in his limo. He also says he doesn't normally kill his enemies, but win them over to his side if useful, or defang them if not. I'm not sure if this means Cassie is a powerful enemy that requires killing, or a lesser one that is of no use to him.

Either way, Gideon's transforms Cassie into a star (her name, after all, is that of an astronomical star) and its her loveliness which captures both Gideon and Bill Reis' hearts. Somehow, this love helps to orientate all three of them. Cassie chooses to marry Bill and Gideon goes to work for him, although he doesn't seem to break his agreement with the President so much as suspend it.

That seems to be one half of the story. Bill is inspired to self-sacrifice, Cassie loves the Christ-like Bill and Gideon is working, at least for the moment, for the good guys. Gideon may have transformed Cassie into a star in order to trap Reis, but the her power of beauty has transformed all three of them for the better.

But the other half of the story seems to involve putting the bad guys into a properly inverted hierarchy of wickedness.

Cassie's story of how she came to love the neighbour's dog is instructive in this context. Scared of the neighbour's dog but even more scared of her violently abusive father, she finds herself sheltering with the animal and accepting its protection. Her clear perception of the greater source of danger enables her to accept the dog just as she later accepts the help of the bat creatures which would otherwise have terrified her in order to escape the agents of the evil Storm God.

The US Navy act as agents of the bad American President and pursue Bill Reis for his gold. Reis uses that gold, however, to direct them against the Squid God. If the US President, his navy and other agencies are not made virtuous as such, they are at least properly directed against the greater evil of the malevolent underwater alien.

I still don't fully understand the ending. Why does Gideon return to Woldercan? Because it is his true home?

I think it is because he successfully fulfilled his contract with the President and uncovered Reis' technique and eliminated him as they discussed at the beginning. Either this is the reward he truly wanted, or he needs the ambassadorship to learn Reis' technique in order to provide this informatin to the President.

Perhaps it's because the spell of Cassie's star quality has been broken and without it he has fallen from virtue back to his old immoral/amoral ways. I don't know what Cassie is looking for.

Interestingly, Chase states to himself at one point he would still love her if he unmade her. Like all good pulp heroines, Cassie is looking for love.

Dan

Matthew Keeley — 04 Nov 2008, 04:15 · in reply to Nigel Price

On Mon, Nov 3, 2008 at 7:04 PM, Nigel Price <nigelaprice at talktalk.net> wrote:

The US Navy act as agents of the bad American President and pursue Bill Reis for his gold. Reis uses that gold, however, to direct them against the Squid God. If the US President, his navy and other agencies are not made virtuous as such, they are at least properly directed against the greater evil of the malevolent underwater alien.

Nigel

Yes, but I'm not sure how much Wolfe can condone this - he spent time as a soldier, and so I imagine he's pretty sympathetic to the poor suckers on the boats, who, through no fault of their own, end up in a battle with an eldritch horror. Surely Reis could have found a better way to tell the US about the Squid God? One that didn't result in mass destruction of US forces?

-Matt

Stanisław Bocian — 05 Nov 2008, 16:47 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Hello!

On 3 listopada 2008, Adam Thornton wrote:

On Nov 3, 2008, at 2:55 PM, Dave Tallman wrote:

Even Lovecraft allowed the forces of good to succeed sometimes, for example in "The Dunwich Horror." Even he could not help rooting for humanity against the monsters.

One can make the argument that "The Dunwich Horror" is like that precisely **because** it is a Machen pastiche, and Arthur Machen was a Christian who did not share the Lovecraftian view of the world. That, indeed, is exactly Ken Hite's argument.

Adam

Ken Hite is intelligent and well-read, but superficial. He treats Lovecraft as a quaint idiot-savant with a literary talent. If you want a good introduction to Lovecraft, I suggest Michel Houellebecq. He treats Lovecraft seriously and attempts to understand what he tried to said,

<http://trashotron.com/agony/reviews/2005/houellebecq-lovecraft.htm>

<http://blog.urbanomic.com/dread/archives/houellebecq-lovecraft.pdf>

Lovecraft was a very intelligent man, and his perception of the world was very clear. Most scientists limit their thinking to their professional area, and never consider the consequences for everyday life. Perhaps rightly - the affair of James Watson, who dared to apply the genetics to human races and intelligence shows that too much science won't be tolerated.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/fury-at-dna-pioneers-theory-africans-are-less-intelligent-than-westerners-394898.html>

But Lovecraft was uncompromising. He perceived clearly that the unavoidable result of the acceptance of modern science (which he valued as a

rationalist) will be the destruction of the civilisation. And for Lovecraft the Western civilisation was clearly the most valuable thing in the world. The impersonal blind cosmic forces don't value it, and even cannot understand it - but it is the result of their own deficiency. The Western Civilisation is good, but it won't help it to survive in the alien cosmos. It is a beautiful dream, belonging in the Dreamlands, not in the real world (cf. The Search of Unknown Kadath).

In Machen, the civilisation is threatened by Evil, supernatural evil directed by destructive and hostile forces. Those forces are dangerous, but can be repulsed, although not destroyed. In Lovecraft there is no evil as such. The civilisation is threatened by dissolution, from without (primitive Negroes, Polacks and similar aliens dragging down American cities) and from within (progress of science, which refutes the basic rules on which the civilisation is built).

His final treatment of that problem is "The Mountains of Madness". Here the rational civilisation of the Old Ones is destroyed both by inferior race and by their own science - they are defeated by the servant race of Shoggoths.

Best regards,
Stanislaus B.

Wymysl wierszyk, wygraj cyfrowke!
Sprawdz >>> <http://link.interia.pl/f1f5a>

Matthew Keeley — 05 Nov 2008, 17:16 · in reply to Stanisław Bocian

On Wed, Nov 5, 2008 at 11:47 AM, Stanisław Bocian <sbocian@poczta.fm> wrote:

In Machen, the civilisation is threatened by Evil, supernatural evil directed by destructive and hostile forces. Those forces are dangerous, but can be repulsed, although not destroyed. In Lovecraft there is no evil as such. The civilisation is threatened by dissolution, from without (primitive Negroes, Polacks and similar aliens dragging down American cities) and from within (progress of science, which refutes the basic rules on which the civilisation is built).

The thing about Lovecraft and race is that his personal life seems to belie some of his writing. Remember that he married a Ukrainian Jew. Strange fellow, Lovecraft.

Really good analysis there - it makes me want to go back and read more HPL.

-Matt