

The Waif

The Urth list — 9 messages, 7 voices, 03 Mar 2009

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Mike Legedza — 03 Mar 2009, 20:39

Hi everyone.

I've been a huge Gene Wolfe fan for over 5 years now, reading as much of his stuff as I can.

I'd love to start a very specific discussion topic about one of his short stories. The short story I'd like to have a discussion on is "The Waif", which appears in the collection "Innocents Aboard." There's been a bit of discussion of the story on the board before, but not enough, I think.

This is one of those stories that is haunting, beautiful, and like most Wolfe stories is subtle, complex, understated...but in a bizarre way rather simple (which is perfectly exemplified in Bin's question to his teacher about how if it's so terrible to burn someone alive, why don't they just not do it?).

However, the story does leave the reader to do a LOT of work, so I'd like to introduce some questions or comments that I hope everyone here might like to discuss and perhaps help me better understand the story.

Here goes...

1) Maybe the biggest question of all ... Who ARE the Flying People? Ariael's name suggests he might be some kind of angel...or at least instructs us that we should view the Flying People on the same terms as we would angels ... but the story is light on evidence as to who exactly the flying people are supposed to be, whether they are somehow alien, or a part of humanity that left Earth and survived the apocalypse, or literally angels. Does anyone here have any other theories that fits with any evidence the text gives? Ariael is described as being fair skinned and almost androgynous looking, which is in keeping with the idea he is an angel...but I don't know how eager a real angel would be to beat Gid with a stick.

2) Niman Pryderi's description as to why their community doesn't tolerate the flying people is perhaps intentionally confusing. I've read his logic a dozen times now, and still can't really figure out how it works. From what I gather, he is saying that humanity can't rebuild as long as the flying people are present, because their presence continually makes us feel shame for the way we destroyed our own world. So essentially, we can only rebuild once we have freed ourselves from the constant reminder of our sins. This logic doesn't really make the connection between the flying people and us wanting to burn each other alive...but maybe I'm missing something vital. Does anyone here a lot smarter than me have a better explanation for what is going on here?

3) Speaking of Niman Pryderi, his description as to why people call each other Niman seems to come out of nowhere. Bin doesn't really say anything that compels him to give this bit of exposition, or at least nothing readily obvious. The only clue as to what the motivation for this bit of dialogue is might be how Niman Pryderi is described as having a "bitter smile" while he

says it. I think perhaps Niman Pryderi sees the ridiculousness of the logic - that somehow calling someone Niman instead of Neighbour will make it okay to burn them alive - but maybe he feels like he is powerless to stop it. In fact, the society has become so perverted that it seems the only way to save someone is to hurt that person severely (Niman Joel must be burned alive so he can be saved and go to heaven; Gam must burn Bin's hand on the stove so that he knows how it feels in the hope that it'll prevent him from doing anything that might cause him to get burned alive by the town; and Niman Pryderi can only save Bin from his classmates by whipping him badly).

4) Just what is Ariael trying to achieve by befriending Bin? What's his agenda, because he seems to have one. At one point when Ariael asks Bin for his boots, Ariael says that he was just testing Bin. Is this whole thing meant to be some kind of test? Is he testing Bin's compassion? But to what end? I've read a bit of discussion that says Ariael is taking advantage of Bin's good nature, but I'm not sure I understand that. Yes, Ariael seems to attract attention to Bin and Gam on purpose (a person who can so easily make himself invisible seems to allow himself to be seen by everyone who bothers to look) resulting in them getting captured and persecuted by the town...but is he intentionally trying to get them burned at the stake? And something happens at the very end that I think challenges the idea that Ariael's intentions are malicious.

5) Speaking of the ending, does anyone have any thoughts as to the significance of the rain falling at the end? I'm assuming that the downpour was powerful enough to put out the fire that was burning, and that Ariael caused the downpour, saving Gam and Bin. I think it's also possible to relate this event to what Niman Pryderi says about saving Bin by raking him out of the fire. Ariael instead puts the fire out, which I guess is a far more effective way to save someone from being burned. I think this whole thing is saying something significant about the nature of love, although what specifically I'm a bit unsure on, but I'd love to hear what anyone else might have to say on it.

I guess that's enough for now...I've definitely left out a lot of things that could be discussed, so if anyone wants to talk about anything else in the story that I didn't mention, I'd love to hear it. I just want to better understand what's going on in this story and any help anyone can offer, I'd appreciate it. And if any of you think I'm WAY off base with any of my readings of things, please correct me!

-Mike

Matthew Groves — 04 Mar 2009, 00:12 · in reply to Mike Legedza

Mike,

1) I have always assumed that this story takes place in the same universe as The Book of the Long Sun and The Book of the Short Sun. Since Bin sees blue sky and talks about the sun going down and the moon coming up, they are not in the Whorl. But neither Blue nor Green has a moon, and no one in Short Sun refers to Blue or Green as a moon (though SilkHorn on Urth refers to Lune as Green...). So that casts some doubt on the notion that "The Waif" is set on either Blue or Green as I have always assumed. But if it is, then that should give two potential answers to question #1: either Ariael is a Flier or he is an inhumu. His nickname is Cold Lad, and he appears to be very uncomfortable in the cold weather. As far as we know there are no Fliers outside the Whorl.

2) The psychology behind the mass hysteria in Bin's community seems to be something like what gave rise to the Salem witch trials or the Reign of Terror. But you're right, I don't completely understand Niman Pryderi's explanation of the feeling of humiliation and how that prevents them from progressing. Maybe this all makes a little more sense if the inhumi are

involved. But I wouldn't imagine Wolfe would write an ostensibly stand-alone short story whose logic depends upon knowledge of another of his own works. Anyway, perhaps I'll have to reread the story with the inhumu in mind.

3) Have to think more on this. The discussion about "Neighbors" may indeed be intended to point readers toward the Short Sun interpretation. "Niman" sounds like a negation of Man, perhaps, again, pointing towards "inhumi."

4) Yes, this all makes me think of the inhumu. Inciting people to prey upon each other. Also Ariael's inexplicable need for human contact. Bin sees plumes of steam in the barn, which he assumes are the other boy's ("Ariael") breath. An inhumu's breath wouldn't make steam; however there are big rats in the barn (Like the one Gid says he killed), and the other boy may be feeding on one -- steam rising from its blood. As Bin speculates, perhaps Gid didn't kill the rat, but only found it dead after an inhumu had fed on it.

5) I have to reread on this too. I don't see how Ariael could cause it to rain, since he is not a Flier, and this is not the Whorl. Clearly the image of spring dawning seems very important in the story.

Maybe it's just a very well-timed spring downpour. But it's not like Wolfe to insert a straightforward miracle as a Deus ex machina. What causes the rain? And does anyone have any insight into the names: especially Pryderi, "Ariael" a.k.a. Cold Lad, and the title "Niman"?

Matt G.

David Stockhoff — 04 Mar 2009, 02:05 · follows Matthew Groves

Mike---

It's been a long time since I've read that story, but I agree that it's more complex than it appears---it didn't quite add up. I'll have to reread. I recall it seems to suggest a kind of "tough love" is needed by the fallen.

But I do think angels are quite happy to beat people when they consider it necessary. They've been known to use flaming swords---so why not sticks?

Dave

Mo Holkar / UKG — 04 Mar 2009, 09:29 · in reply to Matthew Groves

At 00:12 04/03/2009, you wrote:

And does anyone have any insight into the names:
especially Pryderi

Pryderi is one of the major characters from the Mabinogion. The name means "worry". A fair bit about him in Wikipedia, although it talks more about his appearance in Lloyd Alexander's books than in the myth(!) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pryderi>

Tbh though I'm not at all sure what light any of it sheds on Niman Pryderi.

Mo

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Roy C. Lackey — 04 Mar 2009, 21:16 · in reply to Mike Legedza

Mike Legedza wrote:

1) Maybe the biggest question of all ... Who ARE the Flying People? Ariael's name suggests he might be some kind of angel...or at least instructs us that we should view the Flying People on the same terms as we would angels ...

Of course I can't answer all your questions, but I'll give you my take, fwiw.

I think you are right to view the Flying People as angelic -- if they aren't quite Judeo-Christian angels, they serve that function in this story.

2) Niman Pryderi's description as to why their community doesn't tolerate the flying people is perhaps intentionally confusing.

As I see it, the schoolmaster is representative of those on Earth who are philosophically akin to Vodalus and others on Urth who wanted to return to the stars and reclaim Man's past glory. (But I am **not** saying this story takes place in the same milieu as the Sun Cycle -- it doesn't.) Mankind on Earth had precipitated an apocalyptic collapse of a technological society. When they started to recover, the Flying People showed up to stop them from repeating the disaster; whether actively or passively isn't clear. The Flying People serve the same function as the Hierodules on Urth; to keep mankind down until they have learned their moral lessons.

I've read his logic a dozen times now, and still can't really figure out how it works. From what I gather, he is saying that humanity can't rebuild as long as the flying people are present, because their presence continually makes us feel shame for the way we destroyed our own world. So essentially, we can only rebuild once we have freed ourselves from the constant reminder of our sins. This logic doesn't really make the connection between the flying people and us wanting to burn each other alive...but maybe I'm missing something vital. Does anyone here a lot smarter than me have a better explanation for what is going on here?

As the schoolmaster said, "Guilt is the worst part, Bin. Knowing that we were on the devil's side, and that what we got was less than we deserved." (p-96) Mankind had sinned, yet again. But God is merciful, etc. Joel's social transgression, for which he was burned and which may have included reporting to the Flying People men who spoke out against the "angels", was that he did not have the time or energy to actively hate the "angels". He let them sleep in his barn when they were slumming among humans and testing them, as Ariael tested Bin.

5) Speaking of the ending, does anyone have any thoughts as to the significance of the rain falling at the end? I'm assuming that the downpour was powerful enough to put out the fire that was burning, and that Ariael caused the downpour, saving Gam and Bin.

God helps those on the side of the angels, at least those who are young and innocent and believe the angels to be Good. Notice that the rain didn't start until young Bin, who can't be much more than nine-years old, came forward to try to stamp out the flames and was in danger of being burned to death himself. And none of the villagers tried to stop him. Bin had shown his true colors and was destined for the flames anyway, sooner or later. Ariael was morally compelled to save him, and he did, because at the beginning of the story Bin, poor as he was and not knowing that Ariael was one of the "rich" Flying People, had extended hospitality and compassion to an angel, unaware.

-Roy

Daniel D Jones — 05 Mar 2009, 01:42 · in reply to Mike Legedza

On Tuesday 03 March 2009 15:39:23 Mike Legedza wrote:

1) Maybe the biggest question of all ... Who ARE the Flying People? Ariael's name suggests he might be some kind of angel...or at least instructs us that we should view the Flying People on the same terms as we would angels ... but the story is light on evidence as to who exactly the flying people are supposed to be, whether they are somehow alien, or a part of humanity that left Earth and survived the apocalypse, or literally angels. Does anyone here have any other theories that fits with any evidence the text gives? Ariael is described as being fair skinned and almost androgynous looking, which is in keeping with the idea he is an angel...but I don't know how eager a real angel would be to beat Gid with a stick.

I assumed that they're aliens, although I'm not entirely comfortable with the idea. After all, they're "human beings not much different from ourselves."

The name Ariel (without the 'a') means "Lion of God" in Hebrew. It's also an alternate name for Jerusalem. But in "The Tempest," Ariel is an "airy spirit" who is reluctantly beholden to Prospero and he thwarts a plot to kill the king Alonzo. I haven't seen much in the way of Shakespearean references in Wolfe's work but it seems to fit here, particularly if your interpretation of the end is correct.

2) Niman Pryderi's description as to why their community doesn't tolerate the flying people is perhaps intentionally confusing. I've read his logic a dozen times now, and still can't really figure out how it works. From what I gather, he is saying that humanity can't rebuild as long as the flying people are present, because their presence continually makes us feel shame for the way we destroyed our own world. So essentially, we can only rebuild once we have freed ourselves from the constant reminder of our sins. This logic doesn't really make the connection between the flying people and us wanting to burn each other alive...but maybe I'm missing something vital. Does anyone here a lot smarter than me have a better explanation for what is going on here?

I took it not so much as shame as despair and bitterness. It seems as though we have lost much of our scientific knowledge in the collapse. The Flying People have a science which is superior to that one which we lost. Why, for example, struggle trying to figure out Newton's laws when the Flying People have obviously mastered Relativity? And obviously they refuse to teach us what they know, which is likely why we really hate them so much and why we regard anyone who has dealings with them as traitors who deserve to be burned.

4) Just what is Ariael trying to achieve by befriending Bin? What's his agenda, because he seems to have one. At one point when Ariael asks Bin for his boots, Ariael says that he was just testing Bin. Is this whole thing meant to be some kind of test? Is he testing Bin's compassion? But to what end? I've read a bit of discussion that says Ariael is taking advantage of Bin's good nature, but I'm not sure I understand that. Yes, Ariael seems to attract attention to Bin and Gam on purpose (a person who can so easily make himself invisible seems to allow himself to be seen by everyone who bothers to look) resulting in them getting captured and persecuted by the town...but is he intentionally trying to get them burned at the stake? And something happens at the very end that I think challenges the idea that Ariael's intentions are malicious.

Not sure I can add anything to Ariael's overall purpose or what he's attempting to accomplish. How much of his apparent poverty and need is merely an act? Bin offers Ariael one of his boots because his bare feet are bleeding and caked in the ashes. He appears to be genuinely cold and hungry. If he's putting on an act, he's going to a great deal of trouble to make it realistic.

It also isn't apparent to me that Ariael intentionally causes trouble for Bin and Gam. If you note the incidences where he's seen, it's always the case that people close to him can not see him but that he's visible to people who are further away and/or whom he does not realize is watching him. I assumed in reading that he was not able to make himself physically invisible but somehow affected people's perceptions to make them not see him and that this talent either had a limited range or he had to be aware that someone was looking at him and to make a conscious attempt to prevent that person from seeing him.

5) Speaking of the ending, does anyone have any thoughts as to the significance of the rain falling at the end? I'm assuming that the downpour was powerful enough to put out the fire that was burning, and that Ariael caused the downpour, saving Gam and Bin. I think it's also possible to relate this event to what Nyman Pryderi says about saving Bin by raking him out of the fire. Ariael instead puts the fire out, which I guess is a far more effective way to save someone from being burned. I think this whole thing is saying something significant about the nature of love, although what specifically I'm a bit unsure on, but I'd love to hear what anyone else might have to say on it.

Wow. I didn't read it that way at all. It would take a hell of a rain to put out a kerosene based fire that had already ignited the wood. (I've personally seen small camp fires with no petroleum lighter used burn for quite awhile in a steady downpour.) I assumed that the fire continued to grow despite Bin's efforts and that he and Gram both perished in the flames. I just assumed that the rain was a mood detail.

Mike Legedza — 05 Mar 2009, 21:40 · follows Daniel D Jones

Thank you to everyone for taking part in this discussion. You've all given me a lot more insight into the story, so I'd like to just respond to a few things that have been mentioned.

Matthew - I'm a bit at a disadvantage, because while I've read Book of the New Sun, and Book of the Long Sun, I've only just started Book of the Short Sun, so I still don't know much about the inhum. Although from the few things I do know, I can definitely see the link between the Flying People and the inhum. However, I'm not sold that this story takes place in the same universe. For one thing, there's a minor line in one of Nyman Pryderi's lesson where he mentions that the students are going to school in an old truck, and when you read the description of the classroom (long and narrow, with wooden walls and a metal roof), you see that they are actually inside a truck FOR school. I don't know if they have trucks in the sun books...or if they did, I think they'd probably call it by a different name. Maybe there's a bunch of trucks running around in the Short Sun books that I just haven't gotten to yet. Also, about your wondering where Niman comes from...Pryderi explains that Niman is a corruption of the term "Near-man".

Mo - Thanks for finding out the name origin of Pryderi. I'll have to read that info carefully to see what influence that might have on how we see Pryderi. (Another thought about Pryderi...I know there isn't much support for this in the text, but I can't help but think Pryderi is half-drunk while giving the lesson.)

Roy - Thanks for your comments. I think I probably see the story in much the same way you do, although I'm not sure I see the Flying People as intentionally keeping humanity from becoming

more advanced. I sort of see the Flying People as trying to do whatever they can to help us, even though they know we hate them. But they refuse to leave us alone because they love us. They are a race that has chosen love, while we always choose hate, and they continually try to help even if they know it might have devastating consequences. But again, I think I see the story along the same lines you do.

Daniel - I really like your interpretation as to why the humans hate the flying people. I think it makes sense, and it goes along with an idea I had where while the schoolmaster gives this long convoluted lecture about why the flying people aren't tolerated, it simply comes down to envy and fear. As for the ending...I thought for a while too that maybe the fire would keep on burning...but the text specifically says that the rain started off light, but soon became a torrent. I see that as indicating a huge downpour, and I think enough to put out the fire, or at least keep it from becoming so big it can burn you alive.

David - You're absolutely right that sometimes a stick is the best tool for the job! I'll have to think more about the idea of "tough love". I do think the story is about love (and hatred, of course), and really how simple it is. It's about doing the right thing at all times. It is dismissive of "the greater good" which people use as an excuse to do evil things, like burn each other. If you feel guilty about burning someone, then don't burn them, don't delude yourself into thinking it is somehow necessary.

Anyways, I just wanted to take some time to respond to each of you, and say thank you.

-Mike

Stephen Hoy — 05 Mar 2009, 22:06 · in reply to Mike Legedza

Mike Legedza wrote: "Pryderi explains that Niman is a corruption of the term "Near-man"."

Niman is also a Hopi word meaning "Home-Going". Hopi traditionalists celebrate a summer-solstice festival by this name, a sort of annual dance of farewell to the gods. The underlying idea is that the gods will return as rain.

Matthew Groves — 06 Mar 2009, 01:52 · in reply to Mike Legedza

On Thu, Mar 5, 2009 at 3:40 PM, Mike Legedza <mike.legedza at gmail.com> wrote:

For one thing, there's a minor line in one of Nyman

Pryderi's lesson where he mentions that the students are going to school in an old truck, and when you read the description of the classroom (long and narrow, with wooden walls and a metal roof), you see that they are actually inside a truck FOR school. I don't know if they have trucks in the sun books...or if they did, I think they'd probably call it by a different name. Maybe there's a bunch of trucks running around in the Short Sun books that I just haven't gotten to yet.

Heh, no, no trucks in Short Sun. Also, I reread the story and near the beginning the other boy is eating bread and soup, and there's no way he's faking. The inhumi don't eat food.

? Also, about your wondering where Niman

comes from...Pryderi explains that Niman is a corruption of the term "Near-man".

Yes, but I was wondering if there were a meaning outside of the story to which Wolfe was alluding.

On Thu, Mar 5, 2009 at 4:06 PM, Stephen Hoy <stephenhoy at yahoo.com> wrote:
Niman is also a Hopi word meaning "Home-Going". Hopi traditionalists
celebrate a summer-solstice festival by this name, a sort of annual dance of
farewell to the gods. The underlying idea is that the gods will return as
rain.

Excellent. Bin's stomping on the flames is a rain dance, and that's what causes the downpour
(perhaps along with the human sacrifice).