

An Evil Guest: tone, and clones

The Urth list — 8 messages, 3 voices, 04 Jan 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5527>

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Gwern Branwen — 04 Jan 2010, 06:32

So I've finally read it, and it was very interesting. The depth, if it is there (I'm not yet convinced), is much better hidden than in _Peace_ or _Fifth Head of Cerberus_ where half the time one is wondering what's the real story because the surface story is too dull to be worth writing.

One of the things that bothers me the most is Bill Reis's death.

We get several lines about him flickering in and out of visibility, and it seems to me that he almost chose the ceremony - how could Reis be caught by the muscle-bound natives he equipped when the USG couldn't? The latter had much better equipment and presumably also knew of his optickal skillz (from Gideon Chase if nothing else). And the bat-men didn't interfere until **after**. They were able to take Cassie away while having apparently no problems with the groundlings. Cassie shooting Kanoa would disrupt things, yes, but altogether?

And then there are the occasional mentions of cloning. Something I don't think I've seen anyone mention is that maybe Wolfe is pulling an _Endymion_ or Young's "The Dandelion Girl": perhaps Reis slips out of the execution, and now supposed to be dead, travels to Woldercon with Chase, returning when he is old and gray back through time to the execution. Because he's flickering in and out, no one would notice the sudden aging of Reis, and he could still live with Cassie.

Or perhaps he isn't executed at all - we are only told of the sound of breaking bone, and never that anyone actually sees his corpse or that his death accomplishes anything. (We don't even know that Reis died and calmed the storm - Reis was not the only 'king' to die that night, or even that minute.) If Gideon Chase can simply lose a leg, Reis can have his collarbone or arm smashed. I heard that a smashed skull makes a different, squishier, sound than a bone breaking. A similar escape would then ensue with the bat-men (an explanation why they couldn't carry Cassie all the way - Reis is heavy), and thence with Chase to Woldercon.

But why would he go to Woldercon, then? His fortune is largely untouched since it's globally dispersed, presumably. Fear of Cthulhu might explain it: his gambit with the Navy may have failed and Cthulhu or the cultists have a good idea of who is responsible. Reis does say that fear of depth-charges is what prevented Cthulhu from moving against him, so if the depth-charges are employed and are inutile, the fear is dispelled. Further, we wouldn't expect Reis to give up - Cthulhu is evil and needs to be fought - and Woldercon is an excellent place to look for eldritch allies and learn the other 2 arts. But why not communicate with Cassie at all? This might be the real meaning of Chase's message.

Or perhaps a Reis does die in the ceremony, but there is no time-shifting: it's just a clone swapped in. The dummy dies, and the real one escapes. Flesh is flesh to hulking warriors.

That there are so many explanations, each equally bad and consistent, bothers me a lot.

But enough about clones!

Another thing that bothered me was the tone. I noticed it throughout, but 2 example really struck me well enough that I remember them for this email.

The first was the Japanese computer speaking in the classic racial 'me rikey very much' pattern. There's really no excuse for this in-universe, set in the far future where presumably the Japanese have for centuries been a 1st-World industrialized technology powerhouse and have been for centuries successfully localizing their Mario games and whatnot for gaijin markets.

I saw an earlier poster comment that Wolfe is just copying his source material, but with some of it, he couldn't be. What pulp fiction ever postulated Japanese computers with voice synthesis which speak in turn of the century Charlie Chan tones?

The second example has even less excuse. While discussing the Squid cultists, one character speaks of California and casually drops in among his listing of pagans, Satanists, and other objectionable religious riff-raff -- Buddhism. Leaving aside my personal offense (I have the utmost respect for Buddhist theology & philosophy), this doesn't even make sense as '20s-'40s material. California wasn't known for Buddhism that early on. Western occultism was there, yes, as well as some Hinduism related stuff, but all the significant Buddhist influence was post-WWII - things like Zen in the Art of Archery postdate the '40s, and it was the '60s that saw most of the US monasteries and institutions get started with the Beat Generation. What pulp fiction distinguished one fetishistic Eastern religion espoused by the Yellow Peril from another religion that Wolfe should single out Buddhism and not Hinduism?

To me, that just looks like bashing. It's as incongruous and unfair from my perspective as if Wolfe had instead included Calvinism in the listing. Worse, actually, because I reasonably assume Wolfe knows a fair bit about Calvinism, but offhand, I can't remember anything in Shadows of the New Sun (and a quick search of the OCR shows naught) or anything in any of my files even touching on Buddhism. I expect more of him than that.

gwern

James Wynn — 04 Jan 2010, 09:16 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

That there are so many explanations, each equally bad and consistent, bothers me a lot. But enough about clones!

Or time travel or both.

At Dragon*Con, Wolfe said,

"Cassie loved Bill Reis and at the end of the novel she goes to Woldercon to look for him."

After a re-read, I'm convinced that Pavlatos is Casey years later. Sharon Bench described the boy Chase healed and his mother as "a little piece of a man she loved and lost." It is entirely reasonable to conclude, based on that, that Rian is the result of Casey's trip to Woldercon, and the meaning of Wolfe's summation. I'm skeptical, however, about that last part. Rian could be Chase's son and the Bench's reference could to the "man" could refer to him. But this is a Wolfe novel, so they are probably the same guy somehow, right? But that's impossible. It is impossible, right? Anyway, all this suggests that Bench knows all about Pavlatos and that is why she doesn't want Casey to approach her with the information given her.

And then there's glamours, shape-changing, and inscrutable, contrary agendas...but enough

about Gideon Chase.

But, yeah, the death of Reis is frustrating. As is Gideon's occultation after Cassie goes to the island. As is, to a lesser extent, Margaret's exit from the story. The whole execution scene stinks. I refute the possibility that it as it appears, but I can't really explain what is going on instead. This is common with Wolfe, no? But I don't think even 'The Book of the Short Sun' has a world that seems so inviting and interesting, yet presented so incomprehensibly. I'd read it again to try to connect more dots if I believed it would be fruitful, but I don't. Not without more stories based in this world.

J.

brunians at brunians.org — 04 Jan 2010, 09:37 · in reply to James Wynn

There may very well be more stories forthcoming. I agree that there is just too little information for a Wolfe story: too many possible explanations. A Wolfe story should narrow down more.

There was one already, in the same World. AEG even referred to it. Perhaps there will be more. I bet there will be.

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Gwern Branwen — 04 Jan 2010, 13:52 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, Jan 4, 2010 at 4:16 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
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...

I'll take it by 'Casey' you mean 'Cassie'. I had the same thought too (not sure whether I glanced over some Urth emails that primed me to it), but I ultimately rejected it.

Why? Because Cassie describes Pavlatos as a faded 'beauty', saying she has dull brunette hair, yes? So the hair and thinness fit. But Pavlatos is an old woman when Cassie meets her. How does Cassie know she 'was' a beauty? Because of the many portraits of her in Pavlatos's cabin.

Now, if Pavlatos == future Cassie, then those pictures would have to be of star-powered Cassie. Surely faded Cassie could still remember what she looked like? Even a little piece like 'flaming red hair' would trigger recognition, much less the whole enchilada.

Yes, star-powered Cassie doesn't look much like her previous self, but Cassie has still seen and recognized previously a picture of her star-powered self. So:

1. if the portraits are of her old not-so-starry self, she would recognize them instantly
2. if they are of her old starry self, she would take some more time to recognize them but certainly not weeks
3. if they were of her present self, she'd definitely have recognized them (as upset about and focused upon her faded looks as she is)
4. if they were of future Madam Pavlatos, Cassie would not have described them as being of a beauty.

Thus, I conclude Pavlatos /= Cassie.

We could try to get around this. Perhaps Cassie is simply inferring that 'Madam Pavlatos is so vain, and has such fine clothes and makeup, and carries herself in such a way, and has high cheekbones, and in our unmentioned conversations claims to have been a beauty, so I will assume she was a beauty.' But there are other problems with Pavlatos

== Cassie.

Pavlatos is really rich - far richer than Cassie's bracelet could have made her. Rich on a Reis or Chase scale, at the very least. But how would future Cassie have gotten such a fortune? Cassie may have been Reis's 'common law' wife, but she wisely makes no effort to contact Rian Reis or claim any inheritance, so her fortune could not have stemmed from Reis's in the present, and if she goes to Woldercon, somehow finds Bill Reis there, legally and incontrovertibly marries him, the Earth inheritance would still have passed to Rian.

We could get around this too - the inheritance was undone, Rian secretly set aside a fraction for her return, Cassie-Pavlatos learned alchemy on Woldercon and made her fortune thusly, etc. But like the execution theories and the 'beauty' issue, the explanations are ad hoc and unsupported by anything I can remember.

gwern

James Wynn — 04 Jan 2010, 15:04 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

2. if they are of her old starry self, she would take some more time to recognize them but certainly not weeks

I think I'm missing something.

Cassie Casey takes 1 and a half steps into the stateroom and sees herself in a mirror (presumably) even before she sees the pictures of Pavlatos. Assuming Cassie = Pavlatos why would she need the portraits at all? She looks at Pavlatos and herself in the mirrored walls of the yacht and realizes instantly that they are the same person. And then she breaks down into tears.

Pavlatos is really rich - far richer than Cassie's bracelet could have made her.

Well, maybe. Maybe not. Chase *did* promise to make Cassie wealthy out of their gambit. He didn't just promise her a major "score". He promised her wealth. Perhaps the bracelet is worth a great deal....ala the Hope diamond. For the sake of argument, lets assume it isn't. Now we're moving corners Wolfe (once again) did not delineate for whatever reason. Exactly how Chase could have promised her "wealth" is still unresolved. Perhaps it is simply that Cassie is wealthy because Pavlatos is wealthy. Pavlatos has already become wealthy and knows how it is to be done. She stakes Cassie with a certain amount of money and sends her to Woldercon with instructions telling what to do to build their empire. Heck, it could be simpler than that. She could just send her with half the money or more into the past. Ergo, Chase can promise Cassie wealth because she will "inherit" it, after she pays a debt Pavlatos owes him by doing this little service.

As long as we are pointing out the endless plots that might be plugged into Wolfe's crazy-quilt story, I want to put another log on the fire. Why Cassie? Why did Chase pick her? Because he saw her on stage? The clone theories are based on a trivial reference to cloning at the end of the book. We assume this is referring to Ries because there seems to be more than one and then there's Rian. Fair enough. But the cloning reference was to Cassie herself. It is entirely possible that Cassie is a clone of Pavlatos. And more infuriating, there is nothing to prevent this from being combined with the Time travel theory I posted above (if Pavlatos is presumed old enough). Pavlatos could have created a clone (Cassie) who she sends back into the past to become herself.

J.

Gwern Branwen — 04 Jan 2010, 15:23 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, Jan 4, 2010 at 10:04 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

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Re-reading the passage, it mentions *photographs* of Pavlatos. Going by the same logic, this is even more damning. Portraits are very easily faked or altered, but photos take effort to modify.

And I don't think she would look at the mirrors and realize "I'm seeing twins, so that means...", since she describes herself as 'a wasted face, sunburned and deeply lined, surmounted by dirty, graying hair. A bent and barefoot old woman dressed in rags, with arms and legs like sticks."

The thin and old part match Pavlatos, the rags can be replaced, the wasted face repaired by cosmetics, her fattened out to 'rake-thin' (however that compares to her starved condition) - but the hair doesn't match at all, unless we're going to dismiss the photos, mirrors, fortune, and also postulate hair dye or a wig.

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Well, maybe. Maybe not. Chase *did* promise to make Cassie wealthy out of their gambit. He didn't just promise her a major "score". He promised her wealth. Perhaps the bracelet is worth a great deal....ala the Hope diamond.

It is. Remember the passage about the 'awed' Barclays manager who informs her she is now the wealthiest woman 'in the state'? And Reis said it was expensive, even for him. But unless the state is Washington or New York or Texas, wealthiest person in the state may not place Cassie up at Pavlatos's level ('mistress of a thousand millions'), and certainly not wealthiest woman. Women tend to be underrepresented in the ranks of billionaires.

For the sake of argument, lets assume it isn't. Now we're moving corners Wolfe (once again) did not delineate for whatever reason. Exactly how Chase could have promised her "wealth" is still unresolved.

I'm not sure there's a problem here. Chase promised her a cool 100k. He delivered on 20k of that, leaving 80k (unless I missed some payments). 80k is nowhere near enough, and even if she had asked for a more reasonable payment like Chase's original demand of 50 million, still not Pavlatos-level. Or are you thinking that since Chase was in love with her as well, he would give her everything he had (which as a Woldercon alchemist presumably would be a lot)?

Perhaps it is simply that Cassie is wealthy because Pavlatos is wealthy. Pavlatos has already become wealthy and knows how it is to be done. She stakes Cassie with a certain amount of money and sends her to Woldercon with instructions telling what to do to build their empire. Heck, it could be simpler than that. She could just send her with half the money or more into the past.

Ergo, Chase can promise Cassie wealth because she will "inherit" it, after

she pays a debt Pavlatos owes him by doing this little service.

As long as we are pointing out the endless plots that might be plugged into Wolfe's crazy-quilt story, I want to put another log on the fire. Why Cassie? Why did Chase pick her? Because he saw her on stage?

Aren't we told by him that's why? He's a local who likes theater (as a wizard, no surprise), and he says he saw occasional flashes of greatness buried in Cassie. If we accept what he says about his starrifying process only working with what is already in the person, it could be that Cassie was the only poor person with star-potential he knew, and her position as actress was perfect for exploiting her newfound starpower.

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J.

A fun riff off of Fifth Head!

gwern

James Wynn — 04 Jan 2010, 16:24 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Gwern:

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It is a staple of Wolfe characters that they see through the superficial to the truth.

Gwern:

The thin and old part match Pavlatos

check.

Gwern:

, the rags can be replaced, the wasted face repaired by cosmetics, her fattened out to 'rake-thin' (however that compares to her starved condition)

check, check, check

Gwern:

- but the hair doesn't match at all, unless we're going to dismiss the photos, mirrors, fortune, and also postulate hair dye or a wig.

I don't see how these are impediments at all.

Well, assuming she's a good deal older than Cassie, the hair is dyed. Cassie's hair is auburn, right? That's technically a brunette. The text doesn't say "dark brown hair" or "black hair". Auburn is between brunette and red hair as strawberry-blonde is between blonde and red hair. If a strawberry blonde were referred to as "blonde", would you say "that's totally different"?

And of course we aren't told of Cassie's reaction to the photos, only her reaction to seeing herself in the mirror before she had an opportunity to look at the photos. The photos might well include ones of her in a restaurant with Gideon Chase and actor headshots. If Cassie is one of a series of clones then they might be photos of lots of scenes she knows nothing about, however contemporaneous with her time.

Coming off the island, Cassie is haggard. Looking years older. So the mirror is all the confirmation she needs. I think the mirrors are intended as a metaphor as much as a plot element.

I'm not saying there anything *proven* here. I'm just befuddled that you think the idea of Pavlatos = Cassie can be dispensed with. And, personally, based on the Sharon Bench conversation and the mirrors in the stateroom, I'd be surprised if P=C or C=P (that is, "eventually becomes") is not part of this stew.

Gwern:

Pavlatos is really rich - far richer than Cassie's bracelet could have made her.

Me:

Perhaps the bracelet is worth a great dealala the Hope diamond.

Gwern:

It is. Remember the passage about the 'awed' Barclays manager who informs her she is now the wealthiest woman 'in the state'?

Well, then, that's a pretty sweet stake to build a fortune on. Anyway, we know she's wealthy but we really don't know *how* wealthy. She's got a yacht. That hardly requires that she be Warren Buffet.

Me:

For the sake of argument, lets assume it isn't. Now we're moving corners Wolfe (once again) did not delineate for whatever reason. Exactly how Chase could have promised her "wealth" is still unresolved.

Gwern:

I'm not sure there's a problem here. Chase promised her a cool 100k. [snip]Or are you thinking that since Chase was in love with her as well, he would give her everything he had (which as a Woldercon alchemist presumably would be a lot)?

I don't *know* how he intended to make her wealthy. \$100K is not what he promised her. It's the minimum payment she demanded. He had something else in mind or else, I think, he would have stated a precise amount in the first place. Assuming he knows that Pavlatos is Cassie, then he could certainly promise that she would become wealthy due to their gambit. Otherwise, I

don't know.

Me:

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Gwern:

Aren't we told by him that's why?

Yes. This is a Wolfe novel. Doesn't the fact that he lays it all out in the 1st or 2nd chapter make you a teensy suspicious? He promised to make her a star, which he does although she never becomes famous (so far as we know). So the one point (we think) we understand, he means something categorically different from what Cassie thinks he means. He promises to make her wealthy although he never explains how his plan will accomplish that unless having her marry Reis was his plot from the beginning. There's more going on here.

J.

Gwern Branwen — 04 Jan 2010, 20:52 · in reply to James Wynn

On Mon, Jan 4, 2010 at 11:24 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote: ...

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Ah, but why should we assume that she's much older? If we can accept Cassie's musing that Cassie is much older, despite her chronological age, then why couldn't we think Pavlatos is really young despite appearing old? If we can accept a premature aging (of hair), is a delayed aging (of hair) any stranger?

It is as much a staple of Wolfe characters to be badly deluded as to someone's real status as it is for them to have deep insights, after all.

And of course we aren't told of Cassie's reaction to the photos, only her reaction to seeing herself in the mirror before she had an opportunity to look at the photos. The photos might well include ones of her in a restaurant with Gideon Chase and actor headshots. If Cassie is one of a series of clones then they might be photos of lots of scenes she knows nothing about, however contemporaneous with her time.

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based on the Sharon Bench conversation and the mirrors in the stateroom, I'd be surprised if $P=C$ or $C=P$ (that is, "eventually becomes") is not part of this stew.

$P=C$ or $C=P$ require us to make a number of assumptions and workarounds, and there has yet to be any good hint that we should think it. Margaret=Cassie is much more compelling.

Gwern:

It is. Remember the passage about the 'awed' Barclays manager who informs her she is now the wealthiest woman 'in the state'?

Well, then, that's a pretty sweet stake to build a fortune on. Anyway, we know she's wealthy but we really don't know *how* wealthy. She's got a yacht. That hardly requires that she be Warren Buffet.

Are we disbelieving Cassie now when she describes Pavlatos as 'mistress of a thousand millions'? And Cassie blew the bracelet on the hopper as well. (Used vehicles usually fetch far less than their original price.)

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That might just be Chase's personality. He wants 50 million from the pigs, no less, no more. He has a reputation for satisfying his customers. And his doppelganger (Reis) says again and again that Reis always keeps his word and delivers on his contracts.

It's not necessarily his problem if Cassie doesn't know how to value her services and the danger premium. It's just business, ma'am.

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Sometimes a mountain is just a mountain!

gwern