

Suzanne Delage redux

The Urth list — 16 messages, 6 voices, 08 Dec 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5809>

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Gwern Branwen — 08 Dec 2010, 04:25

On Thu, Apr 23, 2009 at 11:15 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:
So, someone complained it was quiet around here...

To rectify that, I'd like to offer up a little experiment of mine.
This is sort of an attempt at what I think a wiki article on Wolfe stories could look like: the story or a detailed summary, followed by analysis of allusions, and then a summing up of the theories floated on Urth.net and hopefully a dispassionate appraisal. I doubt this format would scale to the novels, but it seems to work well in this case.

I recently gave it another polish and put it on my website:
<http://www.gwern.net/Suzanne%20Delage.html>

Hopefully this form is much more readable. I don't think I missed any major theories about "Suzanne Delage" but perhaps someone has thought of a new one in the last year or so?

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Gerry Quinn — 08 Dec 2010, 06:05 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: "Gwern Branwen" <gwern0 at gmail.com>
On Thu, Apr 23, 2009 at 11:15 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:
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Hopefully this form is much more readable. I don't think I missed any major theories about "Suzanne Delage" but perhaps someone has thought of a new one in the last year or so?

I believe I have an explanation of the story, which falls close to the category of 'Missed Chances' in your list, but the link there from Alice Turner does not really hit the target. I'm pretty sure of this explanation, so Lee and James may feel free to line up the slings and arrow! Here it is:

Suzanne Delage is a kind of horror story, but the supernatural element is something we do not think of as supernatural, because it is the stuff of every romance novel - only Wolfe has inverted

the story. The element is as follows: there is one person who is made for us, and when we meet them we will fall in love, perhaps have to overcome some vicissitudes, but eventually live happily ever after.

The key to it is near the beginning, in the paragraph that starts: "When I had switched off the light I lay recalling, very pleasantly on the whole, my life. It has been a pleasant life, though I fear a dull, and perhaps a lonely, one."

So might a goose nailed to the floor of a foie gras forcing pen describe its life, if it were philosophically inclined, and determined to look on the bright side of things. This man's life is empty and blighted. Why? Because by some perverse operation of chance, he has never met his other half, the woman he is made to love. (Does the converse apply to Suzanne? I do not know. Perhaps her life works okay both ways.)

At the end after "the usual half teasing reproaches about my (supposed) gay bachelor life" he sees and is enchanted by Suzanne's daughter, who is (we are told) the image of Suzanne at the age when he should have met her. There is no auctorial duplicity here. She is indeed the daughter, not Suzanne, and she is indeed the image of Suzanne. The description is deliberately sensuous in regard to her body "the virginal breasts half afraid to press the soft angora of her sweater, nor the little waist I might have circled with my two hands", and also refers to her spirit "vivacity coupled with an innocence and intelligence that were hers alone". There is no doubt here - this is the image of the woman he would have loved. If only he had met her.

By some perverse conspiracy of chance or fate he did not, and his life has been wasted.

- Gerry Quinn

David Duffy — 08 Dec 2010, 06:20 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

From: "Gwern Branwen" <gwern0 at gmail.com>

On Thu, Apr 23, 2009 at 11:15 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

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You needed to polish this bit a little more ;)

"but that lie has, nearly always, been so conditioned to consider himself the roost mundane of creatures"

On Wed, 8 Dec 2010, Gerry Quinn wrote:

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[...]

By some perverse conspiracy of chance or fate he did not, and his life has been wasted.

I like this, except for the fact that the passage he is meditating on says that the extraordinary experience is what is forgotten, which implies he did see SD when he and she was young.

Cheers, David Duffy.

Mo Holkar — 08 Dec 2010, 12:42 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

At 04:25 08/12/2010, Gwern wrote:

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Added a link to this from the WolfeWiki page now!

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

David Stockhoff — 08 Dec 2010, 13:02 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Interesting.

I'm baffled as to why "Cloning" appears as a clue but not as a theory. To me, there are 3 "obvious" Clues, with a capital C---that is, objectively verifiable as signals from writer to reader:

(1) Proust. This is just the narrator's hook, but the story must proceed logically from it in some way, even if it mutates.

(2) Artificial fertilization of urchins: There are no coincidences, or rather none that go unexploited, in Wolfe.

(3) The Snow White correspondence: We know Wolfe works this way, as commented in the entry.

Without having thought much about the story, I propose that the story is basically a Proustian memory anecdote draped on a Snow White frame, with cloning as a mechanism to connect the two. The rest is noise.

On 12/7/2010 11:25 PM, Gwern Branwen wrote:

On Thu, Apr 23, 2009 at 11:15 PM, Gwern Branwen<gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

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Gwern Branwen — 09 Dec 2010, 04:01 · follows David Stockhoff

From: "Gerry Quinn" <gerryq at indigo.ie>

Suzanne Delage is a kind of horror story, but the supernatural element is something we do not think of as supernatural, because it is the stuff of very romance novel - only Wolfe has inverted the story. The element is as follows: there is one person who is made for us, and when we meet them we will fall in love, perhaps have to overcome some vicissitudes, but eventually live happily ever after.

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This is a very good exposition of the missed-chances theory (<http://www.gwern.net/Suzanne%20Delage.html#missed-chances>) which I should probably steal, since it's better than my, Turner, or Christensen's version.

I don't like this theory in general because while it works on its own terms, its terms call for ignoring all the strange parts - Kidd's introduction, the narrator's promise, the detailed incidents, the pictures, etc etc.

From: "David Duffy" <davidD at qimr.edu.au>

You needed to polish this bit a little more ;)

"but that lie has, nearly always, been so conditioned to consider himself the roost mundane of creatures"

Works are never finished, only abandoned!

From: David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net>

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Without having thought much about the story, I propose that the story is basically a Proustian memory anecdote draped on a Snow White frame, with cloning as a mechanism to connect the two. The rest is noise.

Cloning is a clue to me because I couldn't come up with a theory to use it that includes an extraordinary but very sinister event, explains the pictures, covers the other anomalies, and isn't too baroque.

You say that it's 'basically' all that, but I just don't see how the parts connect. How does A lead to B in your theory? How does the mother lead to Suzanne lead to a sighting of a grand-daughter and the narrator know anything about this?

(It's kind of funny you say that Wolfe does no coincidences and then later say 'The rest is noise'.)

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Jerry Friedman — 09 Dec 2010, 04:46 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

From: Gerry Quinn gerryq at indigo.ie

From: "Gwern Branwen" <gwern0 at gmail.com>

On Thu, Apr 23, 2009 at 11:15 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:

So, someone complained it was quiet around here...

...

Heh heh.

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There is no doubt here - this is the image of the woman he would have loved. If only he had met her.

By some perverse conspiracy of chance or fate he did not, and his life has been wasted.

I pretty much agree with this--it's "the dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability"--but I suspect supernatural intervention. I see no connection to Snow White and greatly doubt the one to sea urchins. In other words, in the unlikely event that Wolfe meant them, he didn't put them in the story in a way that helps me enjoy it.

An easily overlooked clue is that Pie Club. What kind of pie? Only one kind is mentioned, very close--chess pie, an old Southern dessert. This reinforces the reference to chess, with its intimation of powerful beings moving people around like pieces on a board. See the end of?Canto 3 of Nabokov's?/Pale Fire/ and, even more Wolfean, Borges's sonnets on chess.

These clues are also connected to debate--Wolfe anticipated that people would debate interpretations. And he provides an response to that. What is chess pie like? Pecan pie without the pecans. Thus Wolfe tells us unmistakably?that the chess interpretation is the only one that isn't nuts.

Jerry Friedman

P. S. Of course I don't believe anything in those last two paragraphs.

David Stockhoff — 09 Dec 2010, 12:19 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

"The rest" meaning vampires and such. Only one mechanism is needed to make something occur, such as an old, sick person being young again. If you have cloning, that's it. That's your mechanism.

Obviously a theory has to account for the influenza, etc.

But I'll have to reread it.

On 12/8/2010 11:01 PM, Gwern Branwen wrote:

Cloning is a clue to me because I couldn't come up with a theory to use it that includes an extraordinary but very sinister event, explains the pictures, covers the other anomalies, and isn't too baroque.

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(It's kind of funny you say that Wolfe does no coincidences and then later say 'The rest is noise'.)

David Stockhoff — 09 Dec 2010, 12:21 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Although the cloning clue could always be a red herring, meant to suggest "Cloning was not yet possible, but a parallel mechanism should be sought."

On 12/8/2010 11:01 PM, Gwern Branwen wrote:

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Jerry Friedman — 09 Dec 2010, 14:41 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

From: Jerry Friedman <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

Gerry Quinn wrote:

There is no doubt here - this is the image of the woman he would have loved.
If only he had met her.

By some perverse conspiracy of chance or fate he did not, and his life has been wasted.

I pretty much agree with this--it's "the dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability"--but I suspect supernatural intervention.

...

I forgot to mention the idea of the author as Creator or Subcreator, which people have quite rightly brought up here recently.

An easily overlooked clue is that Pie Club. What kind of pie? Only one kind is mentioned, very close--chess pie, an old Southern dessert. This reinforces the reference to chess, with its intimation of powerful beings moving people around like pieces on a board. See the end of Canto 3 of Nabokov's /Pale Fire/ and, even more Wolfean, Borges's sonnets on chess.

And here I forgot to mention "queens".

Jerry Friedman

Gerry Quinn — 09 Dec 2010, 17:39 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

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

From: Jerry Friedman

From: Gerry Quinn gerryq at indigo.ie

Suzanne Delage is a kind of horror story, but the supernatural element is something we do not think of as supernatural, because it is > the stuff of every romance novel - only Wolfe has inverted the story.

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That's a good point about the "dislocation" - I think it satisfies Gwern's question about "the narrator's promise". I don't think Kidd's introduction should really guide our interpretation. So what of the other parts of the story - the quilts, the photographs, etc. - which seem extraneous to the above interpretation?

To my mind they can be interpreted simply as setting; they frame the plot and are necessary to support it, but are not really part of the plot itself, nor do they supply puzzle clues.

I also see no real connection to Snow White, unless the narrator is Snow White, in which case perhaps the bitter old woman is the Witch. But there are no dwarves in sight. If the tale is one of

supernatural intervention, though, perhaps it could be looked for here.
The proposed association with sea urchins is plainly spurious.
- Gerry Quinn

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 09 Dec 2010, 18:52 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Thanks for the feedback on my little proposal. ;)

It seems that two of the verifiable clues are ruled out, leaving only Proust and memory and Wolfean narrative inversions in consideration. Sometimes Wolfe does write a fairly straightforward (in the sense of limited to the source genre) homage to a favorite author, such as Dunsany, in which there is barely a sci-fi twist at all. Perhaps there is none here. Again, the rest (vampires, etc.) must be noise and supposition. It's striking, isn't it, and telling, that this relatively simple and slight story can receive such projections. (Not to mock their originators.)

I'll have to look at the story tonight.

--- On Thu, 12/9/10, Gerry Quinn <gerryq at indigo.ie> wrote:

From: Gerry Quinn <gerryq at indigo.ie>
Subject: Re: (urth) Suzanne Delage redux
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Thursday, December 9, 2010, 12:39 PM

#yiv612575330 DIV {
MARGIN:0px;}

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

From:
Jerry
Friedman

From: Gerry Quinn gerryq at indigo.ie
Suzanne

Delage is a kind of horror story, but the supernatural element is something we do not think of as supernatural, because it is > the stuff of every romance novel - only Wolfe has inverted the story.

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conspiracy of chance or fate he did not, and his life has been wasted.

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-----Inline Attachment Follows-----

Gwern Branwen — 09 Dec 2010, 22:28 · follows DAVID STOCKHOFF

From: Jerry Friedman <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

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These clues are also connected to debate--Wolfe anticipated that people would debate interpretations. And he provides an response to that. What is chess pie like? Pecan pie without the pecans. Thus Wolfe tells us unmistakably that the chess interpretation is the only one that isn't nuts.

Jerry Friedman

Where is the Pie Club described as baking 'chess pie'? 'chess' is used exactly once in the story, and nothing to do with pies ("the chess and debating society types").

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Jerry Friedman — 09 Dec 2010, 22:53 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>

[missed-chances theory]

I don't like this theory in general because while it works on its own terms, its terms call for ignoring all the strange parts - Kidd's introduction, the narrator's promise, the detailed incidents, the

pictures, etc etc.

I think that if you imagine that unknown supernatural forces are causing all this it works, except for Kidd's introduction.

The quilting business is because otherwise the reader would say, "Come on, in a small town there would be connections between people even if they weren't in the same clique in high school." So Wolfe provides a connection (with small-town atmosphere) and a reason it doesn't lead to a meeting between the narrator and Suzanne.

The pictures were another thing for the supernatural forces to interrupt, and of course, to answer the question "Doesn't the narrator have yearbook pictures?" (I hadn't realized high school yearbooks with photos of clubs were that old, but they are. Next: were there high school debate teams at the time of the Spanish flu pandemic?)

Jerry

Jerry Friedman — 09 Dec 2010, 23:08 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: Gwern Branwen gwern0 at gmail.com

From: Jerry Friedman <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

...

An easily overlooked clue is that Pie Club. What kind of pie? Only one kind is mentioned, very close--chess pie, an old Southern dessert.

...

Where is the Pie Club described as baking 'chess pie'? 'chess' is used exactly once in the story, and nothing to do with pies ("the chess and debating society types").

Sorry to be unclear. I was joking, as I said in my postscript. Robert Borski, you told us, took "Pie Club" as a clue for apples. Well, the word "apple" isn't even in the story, and neither is "blueberry", "peach", or any such-- but "chess" appears fairly close to "pie". So I was suggesting that, nonsensical though the pie-leads-to-chess connection is, it's still stronger than the pie-leads-to-apple-leads-to-poisoned-apple-leads-to-Snow-White connection. ("Queen" is equally good for both, of course, and now that I think about it, so is Suzanne's black hair and white skin.)

Jerry Friedman

Gerry Quinn — 10 Dec 2010, 02:57 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

From: Jerry Friedman

From: Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com>

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Kidd's introduction is just another interpretation (really, it's not even that).. Why worry more about it than about Borski's Snow White, or any other interpretation?

The rest I believe is, as you say above, part of the setting, without which it is impossible to tell a story. This also connects to something else, as follows...

Arguably the fact of Suzanne having a daughter is a difficulty for my interpretation. It would be more symmetric if her life were blighted too, or at least not described in any way. It does not invalidate my interpretation, but it seems to make its expression in the story less perfect. But without the daughter, how then to tell the story? Something with photographs might work, but it would be hard to create the same impact. [Maybe, though, that's what made Wolfe think about photographs.]

The best is the enemy of the good. Wolfe makes the compromise and gives her a daughter, so that he can manufacture an ending that works. That is part of the mechanics of writing. Sometimes stuff is in there because it's needed to make the story work. Trying to interpret the story based on the specific characteristics of stuff of this kind is a huge mistake, leading away from the truth instead of towards it.

- Gerry Quinn