

Urth Digest, Vol 76, Issue 82

The Urth list — 15 messages, 5 voices, 13 Dec 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5816>

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Andrew Mason — 13 Dec 2010, 00:13

Lee Berman wrote:

Severian CAN be both a virgin and non-virgin. The reason is because

he is not a material being. His substance is a product of text and mental images. Since the main text suggests he is a virgin and the sub-text suggests he is not, we can have two contradictory mental images formed. Which is right? That's the point. Neither or both!

I am not engaging in silly sophistry. I believe Wolfe writes with the exact principles I just outlined in mind.

Ah, OK. Well, then...

I think that _in general_ the distinction I made still holds. A work can have an allegorical meaning, or a mythic resonance, or a reference to the author's biography, or whatever, without this in any way subverting its literal meaning. While if a work has another literal meaning, distinct from the surface one, this will _normally_ subvert the surface meaning. In discovering what really happens, we discover that we were wrong about what seemed to happen. I now know (because you have explained) that this is not what you were claiming about Wolfe. But I suspect that some interpreters of Wolfe - Peter Wright, perhaps, or Robert Borski - have been trying to show that normal ways of reading him were wrong. Certainly it's not obvious that they were not doing that.

Now, an author definitely can do what you describe - intending more than one literal meaning without intending either to be the right one. Does Wolfe do so? Almost certainly he does. I think that _The Fifth Head of Cerberus_ is probably meant to be radically ambiguous about who, if any, are the indigenous people and who, if any, are the colonists. But then I'm not sure that _Cerberus_ can really be said to have a surface meaning - whatever the truth is, it's hidden. There are some statements that all readers can agree on, like 'There is a character called Number Five', but they aren't really enough to tell us what the story is about. So what you are positing in _New Sun_ is something rather different, I think.

I take it that on any reading there are going to be some stable facts - things like 'Severian is a torturer', or 'Typhon has two heads'. These aren't going to become matters of dispute. But I think there are also things which may become matters of dispute, but to which there is a right answer. This is because, as I've said before, Wolfe overestimates his readers' intelligence; he expects things to be clear when they aren't. Often when asked about such things he is quite ready to clarify them. For instance, when asked who Blood's father was he said, quite straightforwardly, 'Patera Pike' - and once he has said that, you can look at the text and see things which do indeed indicate it. Before he said that people may have had different views on who Blood's father was, and those turned out to be wrong. it's not clear where to draw a line between cases like this and the kind of radical ambiguity you're suggesting, where no one needs to be wrong.

Now, I'm going to bypass the God stuff, interesting though it is (though I do think that not everyone who believes in God will accept the way you describe the question - and especially not all Catholics) because I think even if you are right there I can still make my point. Even if there is some kind of radical contradiction in the nature of reality, you can't accept that everything is true. (It is a principle of traditional logic that from a contradiction everything follows, but those philosophers who accept contradictions reject this principle.) .When I believe something I don't automatically also believe the opposite. And the same applies to literature (and indeed, I would say, can be applied rather more comfortably to literature than to reality); even if I accept that a work has more than one reading, incompatible but equally real, this does not mean that I will accept every reading of it. So I need some test of plausibility to decide what I will accept and what I will reject. This may not exactly follow the canons of traditional logic, but it's still a standard of rationality of some kind.

(If you could resume virginity after a year, that would have made quite a difference to life on the Whorl.)

James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 14:02 · in reply to Andrew Mason

Andrew Mason-

Often when asked about such things he is quite ready to clarify them. For instance, when asked who Blood's father was he said, quite straightforwardly, 'Patera Pike' - and once he has said that, you can look at the text and see things which do indeed indicate it. Before he said that people may have had different views on who Blood's father was, and those turned out to be wrong. it's not clear where to draw a line between cases like this and the kind of radical ambiguity you're suggesting, where no one needs to be wrong.

Off the subject, you know, I can't ever remember being confused about Blood's father. I was really surprised to learn it was a matter of dispute. I'm not bragging. I mean, I might have just been lucky in picking my interpretation. However, it brings to mind Lee's young woman/crone picture analogy. Or, Stephen King's ink blot/picture of Jesus analogy in "The Shining". When I read it, I said "Oh, Pike, Blood, Rose of Sharon." People bring different backgrounds to Wolfe's works and sometimes they pay off. I always think of Alice K. Turner's connection between Jonas and the Tin Woodman. <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0209/1785.txt.shtml>

Lee Berman — 13 Dec 2010, 15:17 · follows James Wynn

James Wynn: I mean, I might have just been lucky in picking my interpretation. However, it brings to mind Lee's young woman/crone picture analogy. Or, Stephen King's ink blot/picture of Jesus analogy in "The Shining". When I read it, I said "Oh, Pike, Blood, Rose of Sharon." People bring different backgrounds to Wolfe's works and sometimes they pay off. I always think of Alice K. Turner's connection between Jonas and the Tin Woodman.

wow, that is good. Not sure if I encountered that Alice analogy in my perusal of the Archives before joining.

Nick Chopper did become tin by losing body parts and replacing them with metal ones. It was the opposite

process which created Jonas so I guess he is an anti-Tin Woodman. Just as Baldanders is an anti-Frankenstein;

a monster who created his doctor.

For some reason (aside from Lost In Space robot, heh) I always saw in sad, skinny Jonas riding his merychip and

vainly pursuing a haughty Jolenta, a model from Don Quixote, Rosinante and Dulcinea. Severian doesn't make the best Sancho Panza but hey.

James it is a good observation that we all bring different things to the table. There are no universal truths here and context is more important than many would like to admit in their understanding of others' viewpoints. Personality conflicts and testosterone levels matter. Even metaphor choice. In the past I used the lovers-dolphins optical illusion to make my point and failed to make it. But the young woman-crone seemed to resonate better, probably because as Antonio so aptly noted, she is a shapeshifter. Always easier to "believe" in something we see happening right in front of us.

(haven't read any Stephen King. Is that Jesus/inkblot thing in The Shining movie?)

James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 15:36 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman-

(haven't read any Stephen King. Is that Jesus/inkblot thing in The Shining movie?)

No. It's only in the novel. It's when Jack looks at the sun shining in the windows of the hotel and has an epiphany that everything his son has been saying about the place is true. It's a personality. A menacing personality. He compares it to when he was a kid in Sunday School and the teacher showed them a picture that was all ink splotches and said there was a picture of Jesus in it (I've seen these, but I can't find an example of what I saw on the web). All the other kids said they saw it and Jack was so angry because he couldn't. He told himself they were pretending. They were just CLAIMING to see it because the teacher said it was there. So he stayed after and stared at the picture for long time but only saw ink splotches. Then suddenly he saw it, and he couldn't see anything else.

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James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 16:36 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman-

There are no universal truths

here and context is more important than many would like to admit in their understanding of others' viewpoints.

There are universal truths. Some questions are unanswerable because Wolfe didn't think of them while writing. But there are single answers to many open questions. But, I affirm, the same tests cannot deduce them all. And sometimes...well, I always offer as an example the question about why Auk kidnapped Hyacinth and why he let her go.

22. /Why did Auk ... kidnap Hyacinth, and why, subsequently, did he let her go?/ -- Because Tartaros had told him to bring a woman. He released her as he recovered from his brain injury, was able to think more clearly, and realized that Hyacinth was not the woman he should bring. (Putting it another way, he released her because Tartaros told him to. These answers are not as disparate as they may appear.)

Wolfe's answer to that is not derivable from the text even after one knows the answer. It must in every case have been guessed at before Wolfe provided the answer. And, I believe, there are answers to questions unsupposed in his answer--questions that could only be arrived at from cryptic answers like this.

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Jerry Friedman — 13 Dec 2010, 17:04 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: Lee Berman severiansola at hotmail.com

James Wynn: I mean, I might have just been lucky in picking my interpretation.
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to mind Lee's young woman/crone picture analogy. Or, Stephen King's ink blot/picture of

Jesus analogy in "The Shining". When I read it, I said "Oh, Pike, Blood, Rose of Sharon."

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Would you mind making the connection for me among those three disparate nouns? (Not the connection among the characters.?) Or point me to someplace in the archives?

Personality conflicts and testosterone levels matter. Even metaphor choice. In the past I used the lovers-dolphins optical illusion to make my point and failed to make it. But the young woman-crone seemed to resonate better, probably because as Antonio so aptly noted, she is a shapeshifter. Always easier to "believe" in

something we see happening right in front of us.

If we're collecting these, Nabokov was fond of them: "Find What the Sailor Has Hidden" puzzles, or from /Pale Fire/:

"In life, the mind
Of any man is quick to recognize
Natural shams, and then before his eyes
The reed becomes a bird, the knobby twig
An inchworm, and the cobra head, a big
Wickedly folded moth."

We're not always that quick even in life. And of course, most of the time in life and often even in reading we're right to read a reed as a reed.

Jerry Friedman

James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 17:28 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

James Wynn: I mean, I might have just been lucky in picking my interpretation.

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Jerry Friedman-

Would you mind making the connection for me among those three disparate nouns? (Not the connection among the characters.) Or point me to someplace in the archives?

The spear that pierced Christ's side. What can I say? That's just the way I'm wired, I guess. I even thought the reference was obvious when I wrote it this morning. Clearly, I'm a little crazy, but sometimes it works. It gives me an appreciation for Wolfe's problem with getting his clues across.

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James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 18:38 · in reply to James Wynn

On 12/13/2010 11:28 AM, James Wynn wrote:

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Jerry,

Perhaps you are asking yourself "If that is the intended connection, shouldn't Blood have had a twin whose name is associated with water?" That's what I thought too as I was reading the books for the first time. I still wonder. But, once you are looking for it, the clues to Blood's father seems obvious.

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Lee Berman — 13 Dec 2010, 19:07 · follows James Wynn

James Wynn- The spear that pierced Christ's side. What can I say? That's just the way I'm wired, I guess. I even thought the reference was obvious when I wrote it this morning.

Noooo way! Not obvious to me, anyway, though I can hardly claim to be the most steeped authority on Christian symbolism.

James I think you are just going to have to face facts. I DO believe you are wired that way, but it does us no good for you to think and write the way Gene Wolfe thinks and writes. We are left back at the starting point. ;-) Dumb it down and explain a lot. At least for me.

James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 19:19 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman-

James I think you are just going to have to face facts. I DO believe you are wired that way, but it does us no good for you to think and write the way Gene Wolfe thinks and writes. We are left back at the starting point. ;-) Dumb it down and explain a lot. At least for me.

Yeah, I'm beginning to realize that often my "explanations" sound to normal people like one of Auk's brain-damaged sermons---channeling voices from blind gods. But sometimes it works.

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DAVID STOCKHOFF — 13 Dec 2010, 20:18 · in reply to James Wynn

Pike as spear, not fish. Of course. I had to train myself to think "fish" just to learn the naming system.

--- On Mon, 12/13/10, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) Urth Digest, Vol 76, Issue 82

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

Date: Monday, December 13, 2010, 12:28 PM

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

James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 21:18 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

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DAVID STOCKHOFF-

Pike as spear, not fish. Of course. I had to train myself to think "fish" just to learn the naming system.

Another example of how one can live in their own world and think it is universal. Probably, it came easy to me because it is also so unnatural for me to associate "pike" with fish. Not a common American term. My parents would have had no problem understanding that "The Rose of Sharon" = Christ. Nor would many other adults I knew as a child. Neither would Joan Baez or anyone else with a background in early 60s folk music. "Rose of Sharon" is a well-known folk hymn (among those who know such things). It comes from a reference in Song of Solomon 2:1 (KJV), "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."

When it first got to be associated with Jesus I don't know. But as attested in the number of songs you get if you google "rose of sharon lyrics", the association is pretty broad. There's additionally an old gospel hymn that says "He's the lily of the valleys, the bright and morning star. He's fairest of ten thousand to my soul".

Rose of Sharon lyrics

There's a Beautiful Rose ever blooming,
In the Garden of God's Love for me;
It has filled all the world with it's fragrance,
It will last for eternity.

Chorus

Rose of Sharon now blooming I see,
Blessed Jesus, who died on the tree;
With my whole heart I sing "Hallelujah!"
Rose of Sharon, so precious to me.

[chorus]

Precious Savior, I'll always adore Thee,
For with Thee no one else can compare;
By Thy Love so divine, I'm enraptured,
Thou are fairer than all of the fair.

[chorus]

Are you lost in your sins ~ tired of living?

Is your heart filled with bitterness, too?
Come to Jesus, the sweet Rose of Sharon,
He has the power to make you anew.

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Jerry Friedman — 13 Dec 2010, 21:54 · in reply to James Wynn

From: James Wynn crushtv at gmail.com
When I read it, I said "Oh, Pike, Blood, Rose of Sharon."

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Jerry Friedman-
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Common in Ohio where I grew up, though anglers were more likely to shorten "northern pike" into "northern". And there's a memorable pike (fish) in /The Sword in the Stone/.

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Thanks for filling in the last piece. For me "rose of Sharon" is only a minor association with "rose" (since roses of Sharon aren't roses, and by the way the plant I picture--and associate with my grandmother and thus not with Christianity--probably isn't the plant Gerry Quinn pictures), and even if I'd known about the hymn, I'd associate roses of Sharon more with Solomon or the loads?than Jesus. So yes, our own world.

By the way, if I'd remembered the story of Jesus being pierced in the side well enough to remember the water, I might have wondered whether Blood had a brother named Water (a chem?) or Plasma (sorry), but I wouldn't have thought he /should/ have a twin.

Jerry Friedman

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 13 Dec 2010, 22:32 · in reply to James Wynn

Wait, isn't that obviously a reference to Lucifer?
<kidding>

--- On Mon, 12/13/10, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) Urth Digest, Vol 76, Issue 82
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Monday, December 13, 2010, 4:18 PM

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"He's the lily of the valleys, the bright and morning star. He's fairest of ten thousand to my soul".

James Wynn — 13 Dec 2010, 22:51 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

James Wynn-
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Jerry Friedman-
Common in Ohio where I grew up, though anglers were more likely to
shorten "northern pike" into "northern". And there's a memorable pike
(fish) in /The Sword in the Stone/.

I'm a Buckeye too and I'd never heard the term pike or northern as a child. But after looking at wikipedia page on this, I had heard of a gator or jackfish (but then I didn't fish much from Lake Erie in the 70s). Yeah, The Sword in the Stone was where i first learned the term "pike". And the name for the fish, comes from the spear.

Jerry Friedman-
By the way, if I'd remembered the story of Jesus being pierced in the
side well enough to remember the water, I might have wondered whether
Blood had a brother named Water (a chem?) or Plasma (sorry), but I
wouldn't have thought he /should/ have a twin.

Really? Hm...well, it's just that water and blood came out together and it seemed pretty
emphatic that she only got pregnant once. And it seemed likely since Wolfe likes twins. I guess
it's neither here nor there since no likely candidate presented himself-- someone fiftyish with a
five letter name associated strongly with water...like "ceybu" (for water buffalo) or "crassipes"
(for water hyacinth) or maybe even a name that actually *means* water. But I did really expect

a twin to turn up. Honestly, based solely on their relationship alone, I would have expected that guy to be Silk, but, again that doesn't work out.

Andrew Mason-

I also see it as hard to doubt (though of course Wolfe had already spoken when I read it). There are quite a few clues - for instance, Mint running away from Silk lest the same thing happen to her as happened to Rose.

I'm not convinced Mint knew about Blood. Actually, I rather think she didn't.

Andrew Mason-

I also find the 'bring a woman' thing less puzzling that you do - but I'll probably bring that up when I come to that point in my re-reading.

Cool!

Andrew Mason-

On the symbolic level, though, I wouldn't have made the same connection as you, because I associate roses more with Mary than with Jesus - and I would suspect that Wolfe does too.

Well, there is that prophecy regarding Mary in Luke 2 "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." If only it the father's name were a sword instead of a spear, we'd have it nailed. But, I don't believe Wolfe associates roses with just one thing. He famously associates them with the sun. I presume he associates it with a whorl. And Rose, with her associates Mint and Marble (myrtle) is associated colonization as well as with death. There's a twisted demonic Mary-thing going on with Rose, though, I admit.

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