

Truth in fiction

The Urth list — 10 messages, 6 voices, 07 Jan 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5884>

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Andrew Mason — 07 Jan 2011, 20:40

Lee Berman wrote:

As Jane says, this is fiction! It is not possible for there to be a "right" answer. There is no objective reality

to measure. Ideas are not found in dots on a page or screen. Ideas are not floating around in the aether either. They

ONLY to be found as neural patterns in each human being's brain. And as long as one intelligent, sane person has a certain idea, that idea has validity.

There is no such thing as the truth about what actually happened on Sainte-Anne, etc., but there can be a truth which is relevant to the discussion; the truth about what the author meant and intended us to see. That is a fact about what happened in some human being's brain. There isn't always such a truth; perhaps he intended it to be ambiguous; perhaps he just didn't think about some question. But sometimes there is. You need not take an interest in it if you don't want to, but I think many of us here do care about it.

I think it's clear that sometimes Wolfe has a particular answer in mind, and not all these cases are obvious. John V. Marsch is a good example; from Wolfe's own testimony he not only intended that Marsch had been replaced by an abo, but expected us to work it out. Yet in fact the matter was disputed. In such cases it surely makes sense to try to work out what the answer is, and compare theories and consider their advantages and disadvantages.

Not every case need be the same. In fact, Wolfe's behaviour in interviews suggests they aren't; sometimes he gives perfectly straightforward answers to questions that were doubtful, even adding comments along the lines of 'How did you not get that?' other times he refuses to answer or remains cryptic, suggesting that these are things to which there isn't meant to be a clear answer.

Now, there are presumably other cases where Wolfe has a definite answer in mind, but hasn't told us it, because it never came up. In such cases we may never know for certain what the answer is. But still there is an answer, which the author intends us to discover, so debating it still makes sense. This doesn't seem very puzzling to me; in all sorts of fields answers can't be known for certain, but some answers are more plausible than others, and there are reasons for accepting or rejecting them.

The real problem, of course, is that we can never know which are the cases where there is a definite answer and which are the cases where there isn't. So we may be going on wild-goose-chases some of the time. I don't see an solution to this.

Lee Berman — 07 Jan 2011, 21:07 · follows Andrew Mason

Andrew Mason: There is no such thing as the truth about what actually happened on Sainte-Anne, etc., but there can be a truth which is relevant to the discussion; the truth about what the author meant and intended us to

see. That is a fact about what happened in some human being's brain. here isn't always such a truth; perhaps he intended it to be ambiguous; perhaps he just didn't think about some question. But sometimes there is. You need not take an interest in it if you don't want to, but I think many of us here do care about it.

Andrew I care very very much about what Gene Wolfe intended his readers to understand. So much so that I have devoted a lot of hours of study to obscure aspects of mythology and the Bible and demonology and gnosticism etc. that I never had an interest in, solely to try to understand Gene Wolfe better.

But, as you elegantly outline through the whole of your post, we can't truly know all his intentions. He doesn't want us to know them. He almost surely correctly knows that if we knew all his intentions his work would be quite ruined.

I apologize for the condescending tone here, but darn it, there is a manner of learning and growing and becoming a sophisticated, mature reader of literature. Young readers demand concrete "correct" answers to mysteries in what they are reading. Adults are supposed to have the wisdom to realize that in books, as in life, there isn't always a "best" answer for everyone.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Jan 2011, 21:20 · in reply to Lee Berman

Lee Berman wrote:

I apologize for the condescending tone here,

If you recognize it as something to be apologized for, why do it in the first place?

but darn it, there is a manner of learning and growing and becoming a sophisticated, mature reader of literature. Young readers demand concrete "correct" answers to mysteries in what they are reading. Adults are supposed to have the wisdom to realize that in books, as in life, there isn't always a "best" answer for everyone.

No, but there often is, and the default assumption unless there is strong evidence otherwise is that there is, in fact, an answer which "best" fits the internal "facts" of the text (if not an actual "right" answer). "Adults [should] have the wisdom" to realize that the best answer won't necessarily be handed to us on a silver platter, nor will we always agree upon which answer is "best."

But it is perfectly reasonable for an adult to hold that one answer is better than another, and to do so without denigrating those who hold that other answer.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Jeff Wilson — 08 Jan 2011, 00:47 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 1/7/2011 3:07 PM, Lee Berman wrote:

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I would be interested to know if you've read Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape"? It seems to be to be a deliberately answerless and unanswerable mystery story, for or by anyone.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Craig Brewer — 08 Jan 2011, 01:14 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

I would be interested to know if you've read Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape"? It seems to be to be a deliberately answerless and unanswerable mystery story, for or by anyone.

I've taught that story before precisely to teach the value of ambiguity. Works well, actually. And anyone remember "The Lady and the Tiger"? I used to teach that to high school freshmen. It drove them absolutely nuts, which was awesome.

So how does one determine the difference between "Wolfean puzzle" and "literary/thematic ambiguity" in Wolfe? That's always the most frustrating thing to me about reading him, and about interpreting him (and hearing others talk about him, both here and anywhere): when are you dealing with a legitimate puzzle that's meant to be solved by attention to other details in the text? And when are you dealing with an ambiguity that is supposed to remain ambiguous?

For example, the talk about imitation leading to truth which has come up lately: that only really works in a "literary" way, in my opinion, if it remains structurally ambiguous whether the one/thing doing the imitating actually becomes the thing being imitated. Severian and Christ, say: it is important to me that Severian look like a Christian figure and, at times (like with the resurrections) even *seem* to become that thing, at least momentarily. However, as soon as we move to either definitive statement that Severian *IS* Christ or Severian *IS NOT* an actual messiah, the whole interesting dynamic of imitation-leading-to-truth dies. It becomes a plot point rather than something more thematic, potential, or always-a-possibility.

That's an example where it seems to me that ambiguity (of a certain sort, at least at the plot level) is necessary for the more fundamental meaning to really work. If it just becomes a plot point of Severian either just being a dupe or Severian actually being some kind of true supernatural messiah (above and beyond the Hieros), then it's just a story about a guy who is or isn't a messiah. The subtlety of not revealing that directly is clever but not actually insightful. But if it remains ambiguous, it becomes a story that actually shows a very intricate and sophisticated understanding of how an a-religious society could become "holy" in spite of itself. And that's way more interesting, and also much more worthy of how Wolfe actually can say both substantial and misleading things about his "beliefs" at the same time.

BUT...if I push on that angle too hard, I might well lose sight of certain specific puzzles in the text, particularly relating to the Hiero backstory, as well as interesting puzzles about Sev's own possible resurrection, etc. In practice, then, it seems wrong to stress puzzle-truth or the value of "multiple interpretations" and ambiguity too much. That kind of conundrum is peculiar to Wolfe (and a few other writers), and it can be incredibly fun, but also incredibly frustrating, especially if one leans too heavily on a certain ambiguity for one's interpretation...when someone else may well come up and just point out a fact of the text that "solves" the puzzle.

Jeff Wilson — 08 Jan 2011, 06:15 · in reply to Craig Brewer

On 1/7/2011 7:14 PM, Craig Brewer wrote:

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Not really what I meant. There are presented two firm answers, the mechanism that determines which one is discussed, and we are left by Stockton to meditate on the lover's decision; this is a reasonable ambiguity, all in the mystery of the human heart, and the reader can envision either outcome.

Atwood methodically considers and demolishes all the plausible explanations, sifting out most of the ambiguity of the girls' emotional lives and sowing it into the physical world with a seed broadcaster where it takes root in the vicissitudes of weather, the lake current, predators, etc. and lets it ramble for decades unharvested. The reader is left with the non-solution of the surviving girl dying of old age among her collection still unable to get traction on her friend's traceless disappearance.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Lee Berman — 08 Jan 2011, 07:37 · follows Jeff Wilson

Jeff Wilson- I would be interested to know if you've read Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape"? It seems to be to be a deliberately answerless and unanswerable mystery story, for or by anyone.

I am not familiar. I can tell you that I am not particularly a fan of absurdist or existential literature. I generally like there to be some answer or conclusion to a story. But I don't think I am alone in rejecting the opinion of people who assume they have the authority to tell me the proper way to appreciate a piece of artwork.

David Stockhoff — 08 Jan 2011, 14:03 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 1/8/2011 2:37 AM, Lee Berman wrote:

Jeff Wilson- I would be interested to know if you've read Margaret Atwood's "Death by Landscape"? It seems to be to be a deliberately answerless and unanswerable mystery story, for or by anyone.

I am not familiar. I can tell you that I am not particularly a fan of absurdist or existential literature. I generally like there to be some answer or conclusion to a story.

If you think about it, this truth might shed some light on your own process. I am not saying you have come out firmly against ambiguity, but your dissatisfaction with nonconcrete answers is almost palpable sometimes. Sometimes allusion is just allusion. We'll never find that line that establishes Inire as the king of monkey-men, or the snake in the garden, or the grandfather of the Conciliator.

Craig just wrote a cogent and convincing post on how ambiguity functions in BOTNS and how its presence is critical to appreciating the story. He's plainly right. If Severian's status (there's an adjective here I'm missing and can't think of: cosmological? theological?) were as clear as it is sometimes summarized, we would not be here discussing it 30 years after publication.

But I don't think

I am alone in rejecting the opinion of people who assume they have the authority to tell me the proper way to appreciate a piece of artwork.

Certainly not!

Lee Berman — 08 Jan 2011, 14:49 · follows David Stockhoff

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No argument with Craig from me. Could the missing adjective be "supernatural"?

David Stockhoff — 08 Jan 2011, 15:34 · in reply to Lee Berman

On 1/8/2011 9:49 AM, Lee Berman wrote:

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No argument with Craig from me. Could the missing adjective be "supernatural"?

That would cover it---thanks!