

The Nebraskan and the Nereid

The Urth list — 16 messages, 7 voices, 17 Apr 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5996>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Andrew Dubbeld — 17 Apr 2011, 00:10

I was recently reading through Endangered Species, and came across The Nebraskan and the Nereid. It all seems relatively straightforward, right up until the end, when Dr. Thoe Papamarkos dives into the sea, leaving her things behind, including a canteen which seems to contain salt water, and suddenly there's a dead woman on the beach.

"She smiled, then when he realized he could not convey the news of a tragic death with any decency in his inadequate Greek. Thoe would have to tell them. He would wait until someone came."

I'm left with a couple of questions that perhaps someone on the list might be able to help with:

- Who is the girl? Is she the woman Sam's seen in the water earlier?
 - Where did she come from and why is she dead?
 - The introduction to Endangered Species hints that there's either love or sex in this story, but where?
-

Gerry Quinn — 17 Apr 2011, 08:16 · in reply to Andrew Dubbeld

From: "Andrew Dubbeld" <andy at foisdin.com>

[SPOILERS BELOW, for anyone who hasn't read it]

I was recently reading through Endangered Species, and came across The Nebraskan and the Nereid. It all seems relatively straightforward, right up until the end, when Dr. Thoe Papamarkos dives into the sea, leaving her things behind, including a canteen which seems to contain salt water, and suddenly there's a dead woman on the beach.

"She smiled, then when he realized he could not convey the news of a tragic death with any decency in his inadequate Greek. Thoe would have to tell them. He would wait until someone came."

I'm left with a couple of questions that perhaps someone on the list might be able to help with:

- Who is the girl? Is she the woman Sam's seen in the water earlier?
- Where did she come from and why is she dead?

My understanding is:

The dead girl was the maid at the inn where he stayed, and to whom he made love to in the cave. After he went back to the inn, he complained about the bed not been made. Later the landlady must have said this to the maid. She realised that he had not recognised her, and drowned herself.

Dr. Papamarkos is a Nereid.

- The introduction to Endangered Species hints that there's either love or sex in this story, but where?

Sex for the Nebraskan, love for the maid, I think.

- Gerry Quinn

Mo Holkar — 17 Apr 2011, 10:01 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

At 09:16 17/04/2011, Gerry wrote:
From: "Andrew Dubbeld" <andy at foisdin.com>

[SPOILERS BELOW, for anyone who hasn't read it]

I was recently reading through Endangered Species, and came across The Nebraskan and the Nereid. It all seems relatively straightforward, right up until the end, when Dr. Thoe Papamarkos dives into the sea, leaving her things behind, including a canteen which seems to contain salt water, and suddenly there's a dead woman on the beach.

"She smiled, then when he realized he could not convey the news of a tragic death with any decency in his inadequate Greek. Thoe would have to tell them. He would wait until someone came."

I'm left with a couple of questions that perhaps someone on the list might be able to help with:

- Who is the girl? Is she the woman Sam's seen in the water earlier?
- Where did she come from and why is she dead?

My understanding is:

The dead girl was the maid at the inn where he stayed, and to whom he made love to in the cave. After he went back to the inn, he complained about the bed not been made. Later the landlady must have said this to the maid. She realised that he had not recognised her, and drowned herself.

My understanding is the same, except for this last bit about how/why the maid died. I think that the Nereid took her life, in exchange for facilitating the experience. (Or possibly that she just drowned in the treacherous waters, although that seems less likely.)

On reading it back now, I realize I can't actually see any evidence for my theory, but then I can't see any for yours either :-) so I guess it may come down to narrative preference.

I do have a further question, though, which is: why did the Nereid scratch the letter psi into the sand by the body? (Or is it intended to be read as a trident shape denoting allegiance to Poseidon? But that seems a bit clunky when earlier we've seen Poseidon explicitly symbolized by a letter pi.)

BTW the stories from Endangered Species are mostly quite sketchy on the wiki -- if anyone would like to fill in a few interpretations, that would be very welcome:
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=WolfeWiki.EndangeredSpecies>

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

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

Daniel Petersen — 17 Apr 2011, 13:24 · in reply to Mo Holkar

Does anyone know if there are any other 'The Nebraskan' stories besides this one and 'Lord of the Land'? (The latter is one of my all time fave G.W. short stories, and I was pleased to see he had another 'Nebraskan' story and that in the intro to Endangered Species he said he'd like to have enough to collect in a book some day.)

-DOJP

On Sun, Apr 17, 2011 at 11:01 AM, Mo Holkar <lists at ukg.co.uk> wrote:

At 09:16 17/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

From: "Andrew Dubbeld" <andy at foisdin.com>

[SPOILERS BELOW, for anyone who hasn't read it]

I was recently reading through Endangered Species, and came across The Nebraskan and the Nereid. It all seems relatively straightforward, right up until the end, when Dr. Thoe Papamarkos dives into the sea, leaving her things behind, including a canteen which seems to contain salt water, and suddenly there's a dead woman on the beach.

"She smiled, then when he realized he could not convey the news of a tragic death with any decency in his inadequate Greek. Thoe would have to tell them. He would wait until someone came."

I'm left with a couple of questions that perhaps someone on the list might be able to help with:

- Who is the girl? Is she the woman Sam's seen in the water earlier?
- Where did she come from and why is she dead?

My understanding is:

The dead girl was the maid at the inn where he stayed, and to whom he made love to in the cave. After he went back to the inn, he complained about the bed not been made. Later the landlady must have said this to the maid. She realised that he had not recognised her, and drowned herself.

My understanding is the same, except for this last bit about how/why the maid died. I think that the Nereid took her life, in exchange for facilitating the experience. (Or possibly that she just drowned in the treacherous waters, although that seems less likely.)

On reading it back now, I realize I can't actually see any evidence for my theory, but then I can't see any for yours either :-)) so I guess it may come down to narrative preference.

I do have a further question, though, which is: why did the Nereid scratch the letter psi into the sand by the body? (Or is it intended to be read as a trident shape denoting allegiance to Poseidon? But that seems a bit clunky when earlier we've seen Poseidon explicitly symbolized by a letter pi.)

BTW the stories from Endangered Species are mostly quite sketchy on the wiki -- if anyone would like to fill in a few interpretations, that would be very welcome:
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=WolfeWiki.EndangeredSpecies>

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

Gerry Quinn — 17 Apr 2011, 13:25 · in reply to Mo Holkar

From: "Mo Holkar" <lists at ukg.co.uk>

At 09:16 17/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

My understanding is:

The dead girl was the maid at the inn where he stayed, and to whom he made love to in the cave. After he went back to the inn, he complained about the bed not been made. Later the landlady must have said this to the maid. She realised that he had not recognised her, and drowned herself.

My understanding is the same, except for this last bit about how/why the maid died. I think that the Nereid took her life, in exchange for facilitating the experience. (Or possibly that she just drowned in the treacherous waters, although that seems less likely.)

On reading it back now, I realize I can't actually see any evidence for my theory, but then I can't see any for yours either :-) so I guess it may come down to narrative preference.

The Nereid explained her motivation. She wanted to marry the Nebraskan Professor. "You cannot imagine what village life is like for such a girl, who has no money, no dowry. Then a stranger comes, and he is tall and strong, rich to her...". She wanted life with him in America, not a moment of lust (and, realistically, she would hardly have had to bargain away her life to achieve that!)

Besides, I do not see the Nereid as a monster who would extract so hard a bargain for a small favour. And the maid knew the ways of Nereids; we have a clue earlier for that.

Further evidence: Wolfe does not just say that the bed was unmade (this would have been enough to link the girl to the maid, if that was all that was intended). He notes also that the Professor complained to the landlady. This is typical Wolfe IMO, dropping an important plot point in an aside. When the landlady in turn complained to the maid, she would have learned that the Professor had not recognised her, or he would have said nothing about the bed. (Or if he had recognised her and complained, that would have been worse.) So her dreams of life with him were over, or so she thought anyway, though perhaps she underestimated the ability of men, especially professors, to not notice stuff... (Had she persevered, I suspect a happy outcome was still possible.)

I do have a further question, though, which is: why did the Nereid scratch the letter psi into the sand by the body? (Or is it intended to be read as a trident shape denoting allegiance to Poseidon? But that seems a bit clunky when earlier we've seen Poseidon explicitly symbolized by a letter pi.)

I think it represents 'psyche' which means soul or butterfly. Various interpretations related to this exist on the web, and I don't know their authenticity (I don't think anyone really knows what the ancient Greeks believed), but certainly the symbology of inscribing it by one who has died seems very plausible

- Gerry Quinn

BTW the stories from Endangered Species are mostly quite sketchy on the wiki -- if anyone would like to fill in a few interpretations, that would be very welcome:
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=WolfeWiki.EndangeredSpecies>

Nessun Saprà — 17 Apr 2011, 14:14 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

I do have a further question, though, which is: why did the Nereid scratch the letter psi into the sand by the body? (Or is it intended to be read as a trident shape denoting allegiance to Poseidon? But that seems a bit clunky when earlier we've seen Poseidon explicitly symbolized by a letter pi.)

I think it represents 'psyche' which means soul or butterfly. Various interpretations related to this exist on the web, and I don't know their authenticity (I don't think anyone really knows what the ancient Greeks believed), but certainly the symbology of inscribing it by one who has died seems very plausible

- Gerry Quinn

BTW the stories from Endangered Species are mostly quite sketchy on the wiki -- if anyone would like to fill in a few interpretations, that would be very welcome:
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=WolfeWiki.EndangeredSpecies>

I think her name is Psamathe. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psamathe>

Klaus

Mo Holkar — 17 Apr 2011, 15:24 · in reply to Nessun Saprà

At 15:14 17/04/2011, Klaus wrote:

I do have a further question, though, which is: why did the Nereid scratch the letter psi into the sand by the body? (Or is it intended to be read as a trident shape denoting allegiance to Poseidon? But that seems a bit clunky when earlier we've seen Poseidon explicitly symbolized by a letter pi.)

I think it represents 'psyche' which means soul or butterfly. Various interpretations related to this exist on the web, and I don't know their authenticity (I don't think anyone really knows what the ancient Greeks believed), but certainly the symbology of inscribing it by one who has died seems very plausible

- Gerry Quinn

I think her name is Psamathe. See:

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psamathe>><http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psamathe>

Klaus

That sounds like a great theory -- she supposedly had special responsibility for sandy beaches, it seems: <http://www.theoi.com/Pontios/NereisPsamathe.html>

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

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

Mo Holkar — 17 Apr 2011, 15:28 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

At 14:24 17/04/2011, Daniel wrote:

Does anyone know if there are any other 'The Nebraskan' stories besides this one and 'Lord of the Land'? (The latter is one of my all time fave G.W. short stories, and I was pleased to see he had another 'Nebraskan' story and that in the intro to Endangered Species he said he'd like to have enough to collect in a book some day.)

-DOJP

'The Fat Magician' and 'The Eleventh City' also involve him, according to the wiki, although I don't have those so can't confirm details.

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

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

Mo Holkar — 17 Apr 2011, 15:38 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

At 14:25 17/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

The Nereid explained her motivation. She wanted to marry the Nebraskan Professor. "You cannot imagine what village life is like for such a girl, who has no money, no dowry. Then a stranger comes, and he is tall and strong, rich to her...". She wanted life with him in America, not a moment of lust (and, realistically, she would hardly have had to bargain away her life to achieve that!)

Mm, good point. OK, I am convinced now :-) Thanks for explaining in detail!

Besides, I do not see the Nereid as a monster who would extract so hard a bargain for a small favour. And the maid knew the ways of Nereids; we have a clue earlier for that.

Further evidence: Wolfe does not just say that the bed was unmade (this would have been enough to link the girl to the maid, if that

was all that was intended). He notes also that the Professor complained to the landlady. This is typical Wolfe IMO, dropping an important plot point in an aside. When the landlady in turn complained to the maid, she would have learned that the Professor had not recognised her, or he would have said nothing about the bed. (Or if he had recognised her and complained, that would have been worse.) So her dreams of life with him were over, or so she thought anyway, though perhaps she underestimated the ability of men, especially professors, to not notice stuff... (Had she persevered, I suspect a happy outcome was still possible.)

Yes, this interpretation makes it an even sadder story than I'd thought... although he has previously seen the maid as 'dumpy', so perhaps he would still have been repelled on realization.

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

Gerry Quinn — 17 Apr 2011, 17:14 · in reply to Mo Holkar

From: "Mo Holkar" <lists at ukq.co.uk>
At 14:25 17/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

Further evidence: Wolfe does not just say that the bed was unmade (this would have been enough to link the girl to the maid, if that was all that was intended). He notes also that the Professor complained to the landlady. This is typical Wolfe IMO, dropping an important plot point in an aside. When the landlady in turn complained to the maid, she would have learned that the Professor had not recognised her, or he would have said nothing about the bed. (Or if he had recognised her and complained, that would have been worse.) So her dreams of life with him were over, or so she thought anyway, though perhaps she underestimated the ability of men, especially professors, to not notice stuff... (Had she persevered, I suspect a happy outcome was still possible.)

Yes, this interpretation makes it an even sadder story than I'd thought... although he has previously seen the maid as 'dumpy', so perhaps he would still have been repelled on realization.

'Dumpy' yes, when she was the maid... but earlier, when he compared his glimpse of her to 'Dr. Papamarkos', he thought she was 'rounder'. Nor was he apparently repelled in the cave. I am inclined to think that she was no more than pleasantly plump; he thought of her as 'dumpy' when he was not paying attention to her.

- Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn — 17 Apr 2011, 17:33 · in reply to Mo Holkar

She gave her name as Thoe, who is the Nereis of waves or voyage. (I can't find any significance in 'Papamarkos', which seems to be an ordinary Greek name.)

Also, why would she sign her own initial beside the corpse of the girl, unless she had indeed killed her?

So I still prefer the 'psyche' theory.

- Gerry Quinn

From: "Mo Holkar" <lists at ukg.co.uk>
At 15:14 17/04/2011, Klaus wrote:

I do have a further question, though, which is: why did the Nereid scratch the letter psi into the sand by the body? (Or is it intended to be read as a trident shape denoting allegiance to Poseidon? But that seems a bit clunky when earlier we've seen Poseidon explicitly symbolized by a letter pi.)

I think it represents 'psyche' which means soul or butterfly. Various interpretations related to this exist on the web, and I don't know their authenticity (I don't think anyone really knows what the ancient Greeks believed), but certainly the symbology of inscribing it by one who has died seems very plausible

- Gerry Quinn

I think her name is Psamathe. See:
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psamathe>><http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psamathe>

Klaus

That sounds like a great theory -- she supposedly had special responsibility for sandy beaches, it seems:
<http://www.theoi.com/Pontios/NereisPsamathe.html>

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

Jerry Friedman — 18 Apr 2011, 04:34 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

From: Gerry Quinn <gerryq at indigo.ie>

She gave her name as Thoe, who is the Nereis of waves or voyage. (I can't find any significance in 'Papamarkos', which seems to be an ordinary Greek name.)

Also, why would she sign her own initial beside the corpse of the girl, unless she had indeed killed her?

So I still prefer the 'psyche' theory.

How about the other familiar Greek word beginning with a psi: pseudes, "false", and "pseudein", to lie. (Thanks to the AHD <<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/pseudo->>.) Has the maid been false to her people or her god? Has the Nebraskan been false to her? Maybe.

But I think its main meaning is Poseidon's trident.

Jerry Friedman

Gerry Quinn — 18 Apr 2011, 10:56 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

From: "Jerry Friedman" <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

From: Gerry Quinn <gerryq at indigo.ie>

She gave her name as Thoe, who is the Nereis of waves or voyage. (I can't find any significance in 'Papamarkos', which seems to be an ordinary Greek name.)

Also, why would she sign her own initial beside the corpse of the girl, unless she had indeed killed her?

So I still prefer the 'psyche' theory.

How about the other familiar Greek word beginning with a psi: pseudes, "false", and "pseudein", to lie. (Thanks to the AHD <[http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/pseudo->](http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/pseudo-).) Has the maid been false to her people or her god? Has the Nebraskan been false to her? Maybe.

I don't think so. Nor do I think she was false to the Nebraskan. Certainly I see no reason to inscribe a symbol of falsity beside her corpse.

But I think its main meaning is Poseidon's trident.

That could make some sense; it does look like one. But still, the letter pi is given to Poseidon earlier (perhaps even to contradict this interpretation?) - does he really need another?

I think a key element in interpretation (unless we assume a far more central and murderous role for the Nereid, which I don't think there's any justification for) is that the symbol pertains to the maid, not Thoe. I don't see how the symbology associated with Poseidon or his trident fits Whereas psi (for psyche) seems appropriate enough to mark a tragic death.

- Gerry Quinn

Mo Holkar — 19 Apr 2011, 08:03 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

At 11:56 18/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

I think a key element in interpretation (unless we assume a far more central and murderous role for the Nereid, which I don't think there's any justification for) is that the symbol pertains to the maid, not Thoe. I don't see how the symbology associated with Poseidon or his trident fits Whereas psi (for psyche) seems appropriate enough to mark a tragic death.

That certainly makes sense, although I think I would need to know that ancient Greeks / mythic beings had a tradition of marking such deaths in such a way. It would seem a bit weak for Wolfe just to have invented it arbitrarily for this occasion.

best,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

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

Gerry Quinn — 19 Apr 2011, 08:11 · in reply to Mo Holkar

From: "Mo Holkar" <lists at ukg.co.uk>

At 11:56 18/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

I think a key element in interpretation (unless we assume a far more central and murderous role for the Nereid, which I don't think there's any justification for) is that the symbol pertains to the maid, not Thoe. I don't see how the symbology associated with Poseidon or his trident fits Whereas psi (for psyche) seems appropriate enough to mark a tragic death.

That certainly makes sense, although I think I would need to know that ancient Greeks / mythic beings had a tradition of marking such deaths in such a way. It would seem a bit weak for Wolfe just to have invented it arbitrarily for this occasion.

The letter is also a cross, which is quite Wolfean.

- Gerry Quinn

Jeff Wilson — 19 Apr 2011, 08:44 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On 4/19/2011 3:11 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

From: "Mo Holkar" <lists at ukg.co.uk>

At 11:56 18/04/2011, Gerry wrote:

I think a key element in interpretation (unless we assume a far more central and murderous role for the Nereid, which I don't think there's any justification for) is that the symbol pertains to the maid, not Thoe. I don't see how the symbology associated with Poseidon or his trident fits Whereas psi (for psyche) seems appropriate enough to mark a tragic death.

That certainly makes sense, although I think I would need to know that ancient Greeks / mythic beings had a tradition of marking such deaths in such a way. It would seem a bit weak for Wolfe just to have invented it arbitrarily for this occasion.

The letter is also a cross, which is quite Wolfean.

And Wolfe is not the first to treat it thus:

<http://smithmeadows.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/American-Gothic.jpg>

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

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