

Wolfe's women

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 19 Jun 1997

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Joel Priddy — 19 Jun 1997, 17:23

mantis say:

Let's see, you wrote: "Wolfe's women do seem to have a kind of limited repertoire: the Stand-In for Divine Love, the Sex Object, and Agent of Destruction." Since I don't want to put words in your screen, please expand a little on this by first identifying which one of the three types goes to each of the following: [specific list of women deleted] Second, please enumerate the types available to Wolfe's men, so that we may compare and contrast these two sets (assuming that they aren't the same).<<

Yeesh, mantis, you mean I need to actually back up the things I say?

Well, let's see if I can get my muddle of thoughts straight... Basically, Wolfe's protagonists seem to be men (I repeat that I haven't read past the first two pages of Pandora), and women relate to them in kind of standard ways. The man is usually on a quest for Divine Love, and sex with women seems to be the preferred metaphor for this search.

But (with the possible exception of Apheta), they are not Divine Love, so there is often a sinister quality to the women in their position as False Attempts At Divine Love. I refer again to Severian stating that women love men, but must destroy them. Also, there's Candy in `_Free_Live_Free_`, who says that men come to her BECAUSE she's physically repulsive (Candy has two of the most common attributes of Wolfe's women: she's a whore and a glutton. not as many gluttonous women in Wolfe's writing as whores, but enough to have struck me as a reoccurring motif. Take his female gods at the end of `_Urth_`).

Women, in there failure to be Divine Love, have three areas of emphasis: (1) The Stand-in is largely benign, but still not the final solution (say, maybe, Valeria); (2) The Sex Object is not actively malign, but very empty, perhaps emphasizing the futility of trying to find Divine Love through sex (Jolenta); (3) The Agent of Destruction. Focusing the sinister, or even Infernal, side of women's failure to be God, willfully leading the man even further away from there goal (Agia).

Maybe this just goes back to the protagonist being male, and many men having a somewhat limited range of relationships with women. And there may be similar limitation on his men, but it hasn't struck me in quite the way it has with his women.

To be perfectly clear, I am not saying that Wolfe is sexist, but his writing does seem to be from a particularly masculine viewpoint. And I'm not faulting his writing either. William S. Burroughs' women strike me as being all evil Mother-figures, but he's still a writing god. And, because Wolfe is a good writer, there are exceptions to the above: women who are just characters. But, it comes down to this: `_Peace_` is the only Wolfe book I've ever lent to female friends and received a positive response. And the sticking point usually seems to be the portrayal of women.

While I'm in this mode, I'll make another observation that I probably won't be able to back up... Wolfe is a writer who can let a tremendous amount of detail about his characters just hang for a long time. Things like: are they aliens? Robots? If they're cyborgs, are the organics original or the grafts? And yet he never seems to be able to resist calling a black character capitol "B"

Black over and over again. In Peace or even (I suppose) the Latro books this seems just like a historically accurate representation of the narrator's response, but it seems to be pretty much everywhere in his writing. He didn't beat us over the head with the ethnicity of the autochthons. In fact, he never seems to mention ethnicity unless a character is "Black."
I'm not trying to be sensitive or judgmental here, just this is something I've observed, and am not sure why it is so.

Has anyone else noticed either of these tendencies in Wolfe's work?

-cephalothorax-

m.driussi — 19 Jun 1997, 21:13 · follows Joel Priddy

Reply: Item #2682162 from URTN at LISTS.BEST.COM@INET01#

Cephalothorax,

Well obviously I'm at a loss if you decline to answer my specific questions (about men and women) regarding your generalizations (about women). So we'll just drop it.

Re: Blackness. I'm not going to say anymore than point out that your assertion "he [Wolfe] never seems to mention ethnicity unless a character is 'Black'" conflicts with my tracking of "Celtic" ethnicity within Wolfe's work. Same books, different readers: The End.

Re: William Burroughs, yes, one of his great strengths is that his savage satire (campy/vampy/grotesque) is rigorously equal opportunity-- to the point that I'm somewhat surprised that nobody has ever used his texts as a blistering damnation of homosexuality. Not exactly "gay pride," that fellow Bill's books.

=mantis=

Jim Jordan — 20 Jun 1997, 00:05 · follows m.driussi

At 01:23 PM 6/19/97 EDT, Cephalothorax wrote:

Well, let's see if I can get my muddle of thoughts straight...

Basically, Wolfe's protagonists seem to be men (I repeat that I haven't read past the first two pages of Pandora), and women relate to them in kind of standard ways. The man is usually on a quest for Divine Love, and sex with women seems to be the preferred metaphor for this search.

I think this is often the case. A fairly clear example is There Are Doors. My initial reading took Lara/Laura and the whole World of Woman in a very negative way. I now think that the World of Women exists in the perceptions of the main character, who is afraid of women, and who sees his girlfriend in a variety of fearful and wondrous ways. Except that all this becomes kind of real for him (just where is the border between psychology and fantasy-reality in this novel?). Finally, he sees her as a living doll. Thus, the World of Women and Lara/Laura are not evil, but the protagonist is just plain scared of women (as all men are). Mama at the Italian Restaurant (the church) tries to help him get over this fear.

But (with the possible exception of Apheta), they are not Divine Love,

Apheta is not divine love. Wolfe told me that Severian is on the quest, but has never found it. I'm inclined to think that the Heirogrammates may be rather more sinister than appears at first glance -- or at least a mixed bag. Happily, the Increate has His own designs.... (Compare "The

Detective of Dreams" for the basic scenario.)

so there is often a sinister quality to the women in their position as False Attempts At Divine Love. I refer again to Severian stating that women love men, but must destroy them. Also, there's Candy in *_Free_Live_Free_*, who says that men come to her BECAUSE she's physically repulsive (Candy has two of the most common attributes of Wolfe's women: she's a whore and a glutton. not as many gluttonous women in Wolfe's writing as whores, but enough to have struck me as a reoccurring motif. Take his female gods at the end of *_Urth_*).

Well, pathetic Candy is a mess all right, but she is also on a quest for love and freedom. With her companions she is trying to follow the yellow brick road out of the insanity and tyranny of modern America (Oz) to the former freedom offered by Been Free in the abandoned aeroplane in the sky (the church). At the end of the book, she and her companions have indeed found something....

Women, in their failure to be Divine Love, have three areas of emphasis: (1) The Stand-in is largely benign, but still not the final solution (say, maybe, Valeria);

Yes. Wolfe confirmed this to me.

(2) The Sex Object is not actively malign, but very empty, perhaps emphasizing the futility of trying to find Divine Love through sex (Jolenta); (3) The Agent of Destruction. Focusing the sinister, or even Infernal, side of women's failure to be God, willfully leading the man even further away from their goal (Agia). Maybe this just goes back to the protagonist being male, and many men having a somewhat limited range of relationships with women. And there may be similar limitation on his men, but it hasn't struck me in quite the way it has with his women.

I think you're right. I initially took Anne Schindler (Castleview) in a negative light, but she's looking for the Castle (church; kingdom of God) also. Thus, I think it is mainly a matter of Wolfe's writing primarily about male protagonists.

To be perfectly clear, I am not saying that Wolfe is sexist, but his writing does seem to be from a particularly masculine viewpoint.

One of the interesting things about Wolfe's fiction is that he takes the differences between men and women seriously. His characters are often less than universal (unlike most of literature), but rather are masculine or feminine. I suspect this arises from his religious beliefs. It makes his fiction rather startling in places. Severian becomes a more universal figure only by incorporating a resurrected Thecla into himself.

But, it comes down to this: *_Peace_* is the only Wolfe book I've ever lent to female friends and received a positive response. And the sticking point usually seems to be the portrayal of women.

One of my questions for Wolfe in my interview with him (and I don't think this went into the final version) was that I could see that women could charge him with being anti-woman. I provided illustrations: There seem to be a lot of bad women in his books. He objected to this, and declared that he did not intend to distribute badness unevenly. And then it became clear that Lara and Anne Schindler are not so bad after all....

I mention this to say that I think such perceptions are not unique.

Nutria