

Short Story 31: The Toy Theater

The Urth list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 06 Jun 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6260>

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Marc Aramini — 06 Jun 2012, 19:45

Toy Theater

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SUMMARY: A marionette master goes to the planet Sarg with his doll Charity to visit the established master, Stromboli. There, he witness Stromboli with his three dolls Julia, Lucinda, and Columbine perform Rosine’s song from The Barber of Seville. Stromboli discusses how he learned to do female voices by leaving his wife Maria behind.

The narrator leaves without his second best pair of shoes, and on the way Lili, supposedly a mistress of Stromboli, attempts to seduce him. He makes up an excuse and on the way to his ship the butler Zanni brings his shoes, and implores the narrator to keep faith and certain facts “under the rose”. He sees Stromboli in the crowd with the puppet controls and then enters his ship, to return to his own box.

COMMENTARY: What is the difference between the imitation of life and life itself? Many interpretations make full use of the last line, “Then I took my second best pair of shoes, and went out to the ship, and climbed into my own little box” to give credence to an interpretation of the narrator as just another puppet. The first line of the story has already told us about his “stateroom”: “Eight hours before we were due to land on Sarg they dropped a pamphlet into the receiving tray of the two-by-four plastic closet that was my ?stateroom” for the trip. We already know his stateroom is extremely cramped and small, at 2 X 4.

Before I discuss the two primary wolfe-wiki interpretations in synopses, I wanted to mention the state of the planet Sarg — there is no industry there at all, and there were no native life forms, so it is fully colonized with sub-industrial technology like the horse and buggy — but the puppets seem to be of a quite higher level of technology than simple marionettes.

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ALLUSIONS: "Minimal religious ones, but a ton to puppets and puppeteers." The wolfe wiki has done a good job with the name allusions, which I shall reproduce here in part:

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most prominent theatrical use of that name is Shakespeare's Two Gentlemen of Verona. Zanni is the name for an archetypal comic servant in Italian Commedia dell'arte. The name is the origin of the English word "zany." Harlequin is a zanni-type character. [end wolfewiki quote] The allusions to puppetry have already been mentioned, but the plot of Barber of Seville seems to be only tangentially related, except that we have a suitor in disguise who wants to win the love of a woman on his own merits rather than on the merit of his wealth.??? Is a similar test of merit/love at work here? And if so, who is being tested? Our narrator? Charity, Lili, or Stromboli? RESONANCE WITH OTHER WORKS: The line between imitation and the real is a theme that runs throughout decades of Wolfe's work, from? "Changeling" to "The HORARS of War" to Fifth Head and Short Sun — and sometimes there is qualitatively no difference in the final analysis between that which imitates and that which is imitated. MY FAVORITE INTERPRETATION: I do think that the narrator is a human, but a puppet to forces that he doesn't understand in a big masquerade, where it is conceivable that Antonio or someone besides Stromboli is pulling the strings. So he is not free and does not understand what power pulls on his strings, though it is most likely a faithless love. Next up is Three Million Square Miles in Castle of Days.

Antonin Scriabin — 06 Jun 2012, 19:54 · in reply to Marc Aramini

One thing I remember about this story is that it was the first time I saw the word "craquelure". Great word, great story, and great write-up [?]

On Wed, Jun 6, 2012 at 3:45 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at yahoo.com> wrote:
Toy Theater*****

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The narrator leaves without his second best pair of shoes, and on the way Lili, supposedly a mistress of Stromboli, attempts to seduce him. He makes up an excuse and on the way to his ship the butler Zanni brings his shoes, and implores the narrator to keep faith and certain facts "under the rose". He sees Stromboli in the crowd with the puppet controls and then enters his ship, to return to his own box.****

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COMMENTARY: What is the difference between the imitation of life and life itself? Many interpretations make full use of the last line, "Then I took my second best pair of shoes, and went out to the ship, and climbed into my own little box" to give credence to an interpretation of the narrator as just another puppet. The first line of the story has already told us about his "stateroom": "Eight hours before we were due to land on Sarg they dropped a pamphlet into the receiving tray of the two-by-four plastic closet that was my ?stateroom" for the trip. We already know his stateroom is extremely cramped and small, at 2 X 4.****

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 06 Jun 2012, 20:11 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Nice writeup (as usual). One other puppetry allusion -- Stromboli is the name of the puppeteer who kidnaps Pinocchio.

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Marc Aramini — 06 Jun 2012, 20:27 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

yes! in some written version Stromboli is called Mangiafuoco (fire eater). I remember trying to read Pinocchio in Italian class and realizing my Italian was worse than I thought. That is a villainous role, too, something which should not be ignored. And pinocchio wants to be a real boy.

--- On Wed, 6/6/12, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) Short Story 31: The Toy Theater

Matthew Keeley — 06 Jun 2012, 21:54 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

To jump ahead almost forty years, Wolfe's "On a Vacant Face a Bruise" in the Strange Birds chapbook features some returning characters from Toy Theater. "Vacant Face" was inspired by the puppet-like artwork that illustrates the chapbook, but I was still surprised to see figures from this obscure story reappear several decades later. I'd need to re-read both stories to see how they interrelate, but it does strike me as significant that the puppets have clearly taken

long-term residence in Wolfe's mind.

Info on Strange Birds:

<http://dreamhavenbooks.com/detail.php?id=New014398>

-Matt

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