

Short Story 68: Many Mansions

The Urth list — 4 messages, 1 voices, 24 Jul 2014

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Marc Aramini — 24 Jul 2014, 02:11

Many Mansions

First published in 1977 in Orbit 19, "Many Mansions" is reprinted in **Castle of Days** for Halloween.

SUMMARY:

The story begins with an old woman speaking to a young female visitor, "the new woman from the Motherworld", searching for her friend. It seems that humanity has split into a group of females grown in vitro and more traditional male and female colonist group who have settled a foreign planet. The elderly woman speaks of the war in her own parent's time between the grandmother of her visitor's generation and her people, which resulted in the retreat to the fens and the death of half the autochthonous population as well as most of the traditional human settlers. She begins to discuss the houses and technology of those settlers. The old woman, Nor, says that her husband Todd built their house thirty years ago.

Nor claims that the young missing woman must have been taken but pretends to sympathize with her visitor for the hostility she must have faced: "They know that you're supposed to help them, to make up for [the war]; and you're not doing it now, are you" Just going about looking for your friend.

The old woman admits that her side was defeated, but that they had more power over machines than the women from the Motherworld. She speaks of houses with human minds to run them and repair themselves, perhaps with the human bodies turning to dust within them or disembodied brains: "If there were people's brains in them (and I've never been sure that was true) then they must have been women's brains mostly."

Nor talks of the moving houses, and how they hid underwater and other places to avoid being burned by the female soldiers during the war — even mentioning St. Syntletica's church ringing from the bottom of Lake Kell. The houses put up roads, even above the trees, and she says that Todd once saw an old house at the end of one path that she believes was her own father's.

She tells the story of Lily, a young prostitute who sees one of the houses one night while out after having drunken a little bit. The house has a yellow light that becomes red and she is tempted to enter it, but flees and is later found dead with a broken neck near Pierced Rock.

At this point Todd returns and begins speaking. He pours her a drink and with Todd present the house begins making noises which he tries to explain away as creaking. He tells the story of the heavy drinking Pim Pintey, who consumed beverages culled from local herbs and the worms under the "aruum" trees. Todd digresses about the buildings Pim believes he sees on Nepo Pass and whether they were of autochthonous or some otherworldly source, all ruined. Rather interestingly, Todd mentions the roads of the Firstcomers as being paved over by humanity, but

that underneath “you can see the bones of the old through it. Anyway, that was where Pim was walking, on those big lava blocks. One up, one down, one sidewise — that’s the way the slant of them always seem to me to run. There’s them that will tell you every seventh one is cracked.” The sight reminded Pim of the Biblical parable of the man who built his house on rock, and he wanted to go inside and rest near the fire with his bottle.

Pim didn’t go, “but he said he always felt like there was some part of him that had. That he split into two, some way, coming through the pass, and the other half was in that house still — wherever it was, for it ain’t up there now or more people would have told about seeing it — doing he didn’t know what.” He watched the lights blink out as he passed. At this point the house jerks and Todd catches his visitor. Todd remarks that “a lot of [his] furniture has those little spindly legs on it, just like that table. They can be tricky.”

Todd relates that a man named Wolter saw Pim laying inside another house with someone else beside him, and “he couldn’t be certain if either of them was dead or not. But Wolter ain’t to be believed.” Here Todd admits that he “helped build this place — and it’s solid as a rock.”

The visitor pulls a gun and Todd takes it. He says, “I doubt that you’ll remember; and if you was to, you couldn’t find us.” The visitor from Motherworld must have seen the body of old Aunt Enid, whose mind runs the house and communicates with Todd and Nor through the “mouths — in various places.”

Here Nor speaks again, saying “That’s the last of her — at least for now”. She knows the visitor is disappointed Todd did not try to stop her, and Nor hopes she doesn’t hit a tree on the way out on her vehicle. Then she says, “We’ll move on now, Enid. You’re right, she’s not ready yet; but someday — I suppose it might be possible. Look at that other one. Someday this one will be ready to seek her peace. Come into a woman. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again — that’s why we’re all so comfortable here: we’ve been here before. Feel the motion of her Todd. How easy she goes!”

DISCUSSION:

Just as in “The Fifth Head of Cerberus” where the planets of St. Croix and St. Anne showed extreme stagnation and extreme adaptability (neither seeming to function ideally), “Many Mansions” shows humanity splitting into two ideological factions that ultimately resemble modern humans very little — indeed, while the dominant group from Motherworld appears to be entirely female and grown artificially, they are still obviously human. The group comprised of “natural” breeding with males and females seems to have become something almost monstrous — mobile crypts powered by the minds of their victims (of course, this is a very negative surface level interpretation). The houses are usually categorized as female minds as well, and clearly the house that is the setting of the story is Nor’s Great-Aunt Enid. However, there is something confusing about the final lines: “Come into a woman. — we’ve been here before.” Is Nor talking about the house, referring to it as a woman, or is the house somehow invading human perceptions? Where have “we” been before?

The biblical resonance, explored more fully below, involves the idea that these humans can gain a kind of immortality in conjunction with their special houses or mansions, echoing the heaven promised to his disciples by Jesus. In light of the alien presence on the settler’s planet, it is possible that the humans who consume so many of the indigenous herbs and worms of the planets are altered in turn and serve as hosts for those — for it is at least hinted by Todd that Pim’s consumption of local liquor has attracted the attention of the houses — and Lily, too, is said to have been drinking before her experience:

“She was carrying a load, if you know what I mean; she told me so herself. The air was chill, possibly, and it’s likely someone had left a bottle with her the night before. — Hunted things grow strange sometimes, though I don’t suppose you’ve noticed.”

The victorious women of Motherworld are trying to reconstruct and help the surviving settlers, but there is a kind of ominous possibility that these settlers have either changed significantly or are long gone.

It is also interesting that the shape of the Motherworld houses are described as “eggs, or else like nails stood on end” in light of all the New Testament references throughout and the death of Lily at Pierced Rock, and to the fact that Nor’s father was the carpenter for the house in which his own aunt lives on, we begin to have a lot of Christ references.

There is some confusion as to whether Todd or his wife Nor’s father built the house that Aunt Enid animates. First Nor says, “Todd built this thirty years ago.” Later Todd says, “This one was carpentered by Nor’s dad just after the War. It’s the cooling off when the sun sets,” but this confusion is somewhat allayed when he admits that he helped build the house.

Is it possible that running into Nor’s father’s tall house in the wilderness somehow conjoined Todd and his father in law, almost like the possession in the Long Sun books? Probably not.

The eggs and nails that are the homes of the women from motherworld and the almost wombl-like homes of the settlers, as well as the feeling Pim gets passing through Nepo pass (implying descendents) of being split in half (as cells would during meiosis to form sex cells) gives a rather gravid feel to the houses when they seek humans, almost like eggs calling to sperm — and I think it is perhaps this symbol of fertilization, slightly absent from the text and definitely pulled out of “Motherworld” entirely (what an ironic name!!!) that gives the final words of Nor some sense: “Come into a woman — we’ve been here before” (the womb that brought us to live naturally, writ in large metaphor).

SETTING:

The in vitro girls clearly operate under a liberated scheme where they serve no one and no longer have concepts of titles such as “lady”: “It’s our courtesy, you see, to host strangers. I know you don’t do it, but this is my house. Now, don’t get angry; I’m a headstrong old lady, and I’m used to having my own way. Don’t you use [the word lady] anymore” It just means woman now.

Nor also says, “I don’t know how you feel about morality — with your people it’s so hard to tell. Todd says we ought to forgive women like [the prostitute Lily], but then men always do.”

The text says of the autochthons that “Half ... were killed, like most of us; those that were left were happy enough to run off into the fens, or lie around the towns waiting for somebody to rob. We would have civilized them if you’d given us another century.

The strange roads are also almost magical, and seem to be controlled by the houses, or even perhaps by the civilization that preceded the autochthons: “Your patrols used the roads mostly, so we let a lot of them grow up in trees again. The houses make false ones though, slipping through the thickets.”

BIBLICAL ALLUSIONS:

There are several obvious and perhaps one or two implied biblical allusions. The girl Lily, who sells her body, is found dead at Pierced Rock (and while there is a rock of that designation in Quebec involved in a story of ill fated love, suicide, and haunting, I feel the more immediate allusion is probably to the piercing of Christ at the crucifixion, especially in light of all the other explicit reference to the gospels in this story). In addition, the house that Great Aunt Enid lives on in was said to be “carpentered” by Nor's father — certainly not an accidental description of the action.

The title comes from the gospel of John 14:2 — “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” This takes place at the last supper right after Jesus declares that Peter will deny him three times — this act of comfort for the disciples concerning a place for them in heaven takes a much more sinister connotation in the story, but it does seem to be a kind of immortality.

Because of its mention of wolves and fruit, I am going to include Matthew 7 here in its entirety, though the most pertinent reference, when Pim is reminded of the wise man who built his house on rock, is Matthew 7:24-27 -

7?Judge not, that you be not judged. 2For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. 3And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? 4Or how can you say to your brother, “Let me remove the speck from your eye”; and look, a plank **is** in your own eye? 5Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

6?Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.

7?Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? 11If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! 12Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

13?Enter by the narrow gate; for wide **is** the gate and broad **is** the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14Because narrow **is** the gate and difficult **is** the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

15?Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor **can** a bad tree bear good fruit. 19Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

21?Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” 23And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”

24?Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: 25and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

26?But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: 27and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

28And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, 29for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Interestingly enough, the stone of Nepo Pass (Pass of Descendents) is said to have “Buildings and walls that run along the crests of the mountains for as far as a man can see to either side (all tumbledown now, some of that stone will run like sand if you rub it between your fingers)? and caves inhabited by ?whippers”. Both rock and sand are invoked in “Many Mansions” in this scene. Animal remains will be found where sometimes none were before, and “Some say the autochthons cut the stone and built the buildings and the walls; some say they only killed the ones who did.” This confusion also echoes the confusion of the origin of the aborigines and Shadow Children in ?The Fifth Head of Cerberus, which will be discussed more below.

Also interesting is the claim that every seventh stone in Nepo pass is cracked — whether this is a biblical reference or not, the book of Revelations certainly has a lot of sevens. (The next paragraph might be taking a throwaway line too far, but ...)

Among the numerous sevens, including seals, trumpets, and plagues, the first resurrection of the dead takes place at the seventh trumpet, and the ark of the covenant is seen, fulfilling Christ's promise of salvation — and resonating with the idea of the many mansions He has set aside for those who follow Him. (In Catholic and Orthodox faiths, the ark of the covenant is sometimes allegorically used to describe Mary gravid with Christ). The ark was buried on Mt. Nebo at one point, which resembles Nepo Pass, but this is in the book of 2 Maccabees and would be a very “Catholic” kind of association. This would tie together the themes of parthenogenetic reproduction, the salvation inherent in the term “Many Mansions”, and the strange reference to every seventh stone being cracked, though there are some real leaps in that series of religious relationships.

FOLIAGE ON THE SETTLER'S WORLD AND *FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS* PARALLELS:

Since the yeasts were different than they were accustomed to, the settlers ?put other things in them to raise it up, and we use them yet. There's — oh, maybe twenty or thirty different herbs and roots and whatnot we favor, and a little whitey-greeny worm we get out of the mud around aruum trees that's particularly good if there's a den in the roots, and then a fungus that grows in the mountain caves and has a picture like an autochthon?s hand in the middle sometimes and smells like haying. Those are poison when they're old, but if you get a young one and cut it up and soak it in salt water for a week before you drop it in the crock, it'll give you a drink that makes you feel — well, I don't know how to put it. Like you're young and going to live forever. Like nothing bad ever happened to you, and you're likely to meet your mother and dad and everybody you ever liked that's dead now just around the next turn in the road. What I'm trying to tell you is that Pim, when his head was full — which it was most of the time — was not entirely like anybody you're likely to have known before. Now you may say, as a lot did, that it was the drinking that made him see the houses; but suppose it worked the other way, and it was the drinking that made them see him?

It is this section of “Many Mansions” that most echoes *The **Fifth Head of Cerberus*, where trees seem somehow related to the larvae that lives in their roots, and the pale white maggots chewed by the Shadow Children have a similar affect on them in “A Story” — that the chewer becomes “God”. The final analysis of the life cycle of the aboriginals and the Shadow Children that I found to be probable was a larval stage followed by a metamorphosis, then an adult sessile stage in which a tree carapace was formed for the aboriginals, and an infectious blood life cycle for the Shadow Children, infecting their hosts and vectors but still maintaining a group consciousness.

It seems that in “Many Mansions” Pim is affected by the worm and herbs he consumes, and this draws attention to him and “changes” him. Notice the conjunction of fungus and autochthon’s hands — which, in “Fifth Head of Cerberus”, were different from human hands. This is not the only parallel with “The Fifth Head of Cerberus”, as our female visitor is an artificially produced zygote much as Number Five was. In addition, the format of the story, with merely three long dialogues with no recorded response from the visitor, mirrors some sections of the interview transcripts from the novella “VRT”.

However, there seems to be very few other details for us to draw from here — do these things involve a similar life cycle, or is it completely different, involving the caves and the houses somehow? The mobile houses of the settlers being superimposed on the ancient dwellings of the autochthons or some other space faring species complicates the issue just as the idea that the aboriginals or Shadow Children might not originally be from St. Anne also complicated T*he Fifth Head of Cerberus*.

Aruum trees are mentioned in the text, and a little research on that proved quite astonishing. In addition to being associated with a type of faux lily, the arum lily (remember the girl’s name who died), they are all poisonous (We are assuming that the extra u in the name Aruum is either a typo or something to draw attention to the name). They are flowers and not trees, and the largest one has some extremely interesting qualities. The following subjective report is still fascinating:

“The titan arum flower (**amorphallus titanum** in Latin, or just ?corpse flower” if you’re feeling dramatic), sounds like a hack writer’s attempt at science fiction: it’s a massive red flower that can reach 3 meters in height, but it blooms only once every decade, and when it does, it reeks like rotting meat. Because it’s so large, and because it blooms so rarely, it’s become an object of pride for botanical gardens around the world. — Where most flowers use a sweet scent to attract honey bees, the titan arum uses the stench of death to attract beetles and flies. It even heats its spadix — the pollen-covered shaft in the middle of the pitcher — to human body temperature to simulate a fresh corpse.

Speaking of the spadix, the plant only got the name “titan arum” because BBC documentarian David Attenborough felt awkward repeatedly calling it by its Latin **amorphallus titanum**, which translates to “giant misshapen penis.”

The blooming titan arum may look like a freakishly large lily, but technically, it’s not even a single flower. A titan arum doesn’t have a flowering, it has an inflorescence.

The above description was from:

<http://thepopcultist.com/2012/10/12/the-titan-arum-a-rare-slow-blooming-and-stinky-flower/>

By imitating corpses, the arum draws flies to continue its lifecycle. Is a similar mimicry

occurring with the “houses”, luring people to “pollinate” them?

NAMES:

Place Names:

Breaker: Probably named after a heavy sea wave that breaks, though it is conceivable there is a technological basis for the name of this location — this is where Todd’s family had a house.

Chackerville: a neighboring community, but I can’t make much sense of the name.

Lake Kell: Kell simply means a Lake or Ravine

Nepo: means Grandchild or descendent, from the latin nepos. Nepo Pass is where Pim Pintey sees the house on top of the slanted stone tops.

HUMAN NAMES:

St. Syntletica: born of wealthy parents in Alexandria, this 4th century saint lived a life of poverty in the desert and resided in a crypt, and many female supplicants sought her out, but her supposed gifts of discernment allowed her to see that many were not ready for poverty yet. This story seems to parallel the call of the houses and those who are “not ready” for them yet, like Lily, Pim, and the second girl from Motherworld.

Pim Pyntey: Pim is a form of William, and can mean helmet or desire and protection. I could not find anything on Pyntey but I am assuming it might have something to do with his drinking habits.

Lily: implies purity

Enid: also means purity, or soul

Todd: The spouse of the old woman’s name is Todd, which means Fox, but the word Tod can mean Death in German but also has a strange relationship with the opening quotation of The Fifth Head of Cerberus: “When the Ivy-tod is heavy with snow, and the owlet whoops to the wolf below, That eats the she-wolf’s young.”

Nor: depending on its origin it can have several meanings: honored or honorable from latin, mercy or pity from old Greek. Since it does not have the last syllable of Nora, even an Arabic root is possible — God is my light.

Settles: probably just what it seems to be

Dode Bequette: Beckett means bee cottage. This resonates a bit with the idea of people as pollinators of the houses. Dode means the deceased or victim of a fatality in Dutch. (Dode is also the name of a village in England wiped out completely by the Black Death)

Wolter: the name means to rule, army

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe has a tendency to invert and play with themes as he did in his Island stories, stories which explored isolation in several different ways. This story, as Borski and others have noted,

actually does seem a thematic inversion of "Fifth Head of Cerberus" where Number Five's parthenogenesis is transformed into a world of female control, and, instead of convergence of alien species into humanity and one another, we get a complete segregation of old style and new style humans. The strange alien species are present, but they have been pushed back instead of subjugating and replacing their colonizers, as in Fifth Head. This future all female world resonates with several of the stories written by James Tiptree Jr, especially "Houston, Houston, Do you Read?" with its all female future, though this story and that 1976 one are more or less contemporary. Wolfe will play with a dominant female future in "In Looking Glass Castle" and maybe there are hints of it in "The Eyeflash Miracles" as well. *There Are Doors* will have a different, more fantastic basis for a female ruled Earth.

For this reason, I call "Many Mansions" the female version of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, and I think it is fruitful to see how Michael Swanwick does the same thing in *Shadows of the New Sun* in his "The She-Wolf's Hidden Grin". The inversions are quite obvious to those who have recently read "Fifth Head of Cerberus" (the novella). The story begins "When I was a girl, my sister Susanna and I had to get up early whether we were rested or not." — reversing both gender and the situation of Number Five and David going to sleep early whether they were tired or not. In his story, the female Maitresse has no relation to the girls, and is a step-mother and they are located on 999 rue D'Astarte, and rather than a brothel, it is a chemist's perfumery and shop (his truffle concoctions are used in a sniffing recreational drug). The narrator begins with her dream of the bas-relief of Romulus and Remus suckling at the she-wolf, casting two infant girls in their stead, with a giant she wolf breathing down her neck saying, "You are anxious for me to come out of hiding — Aren't you, daughter?" At the end of the dream, it is revealed that it is still not time.

Work is still performed by slaves, and their tutor is one such, though she can have a bank account (exhibiting much more freedom than the slaves in *Fifth Head Of Cerberus* seemed to). The planets are still St. Croix and St. Anne, but this time the tutor, rather than being robotic or unchanging like M. Million, is Tante Amelie, last in a string of female tutors from St. Anne. Swanwick does use the heron metaphor for this tutor that Wolfe himself employed in his description of the abos in the central novella "A Story". Aubrey Veil exists in this narrative, and Veil's hypothesis and the story of the Frenchman's Landing on St. Anne is related.

The innovation Swanwick makes to the story involves the nature of the aborigines (the narrator's position in the faux debate prompted by the tutor) that the abos had a space faring origin, descended to Stone Level technology, and interbred with the human settlers, "producing human offspring with latent aboriginal genes." In this story, it is the sister, Susana, who becomes sullen and moody rather than Number 5 in his responses to Maitre's experiments. Her studies on aboriginal traits conclude "This implies a congeries of recessive sex-linked genes; they, being dependent on the x-chromosome, will necessarily appear only in women. — They also posit that the two species were a case of divergence from a single species, named H. sidereus (starmen). Susana develops a love for the theater much like the play that David and Number 5 put on, but hers are stories of empowered or repressed women protagonists or even early feminist writings. She plays a part in *The Children's Hour*, in which a female at an all girl's school begins a rumor that two of the teachers are lesbians, which destroys their reputation. One of the teachers does admit to having feelings for the other, but winds up hanging herself in the ensuing mess. (Several of the dramas mentioned deal with suicide of the main female characters: *Madame Butterfly, The Children's Hour, Hedda Gabbler, Antony and Cleopatra* all involve suicide, but even more prevalent are the strong female characters (both malevolently manipulative and heroically innocent) who have prominent roles. The plot of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, in which the mother runs brothels while her daughter is an educated modern woman, resonates with *Fifth Head of Cerberus* itself. In Swanwick's story, women are

far more numerous than men, and the decrease of males is a problem for the worlds.

The woman in pink is split in twain: first into a woman in black who flirts with Susanna at mass, and they hold hands, and then Maitresse herself wears a pink dress. During the final scenes of the story, Tante Amelie takes them to see an entertainment: combat between two female slaves, who are treated with the hallucinatory perfume drugs that the girls' father creates, which are capable of maintaining all sorts of illusions. The narrator is shocked to find that one of the slaves bears her own face, an echo of the four armed slave in "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" who bears such a close resemblance to Number Five. The lesbian relationship blossoming between her sister and the woman in black comes out in the open, and the resulting dissatisfaction seems to shake up the household. It is revealed that the narrator is a failed clone, made in an attempt to produce a male heir. The other clones were sold. The story ends with the narrator in a dream in which the she-wolf finally says it is time, and "not so much awakening as taking [her] dream state with [her] into the waking world," the narrator leaves behind her husband and twin sons and casts off the guise of humanity and roam wild without her human skin, naked and prowling in Port-Mimizon. She asserts that the time has come for all like her to cast off their humanity and return to aboriginal existence, though the world seems to smell always of canvas and bitter truffle.

This ending is meant to invoke the same indeterminacy of "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" involving who was an aborigine and if there was any way to tell, but in this case the uncertainty is extended to whether the ending, with the liberation from human flesh, involves the drugs the narrator's father produces which smell of truffles or not — are the narrator's perceptions of that aboriginal awakening drug induced?

I lean toward the interpretation that in fact the ending of Swanwick's supports the self-destructive abuse of drugs as a coping mechanism, an escape into fantasy — primarily because of the dramatic works mentioned earlier in the text. Most of them are tragedies of self-destruction. Even though this is perhaps historically a larger representative sample from historical dramas highlighting early feminist obstacles, there are still stories of empowered and successful women that don't end in tragedy and self destruction (ie — stories like *Vanity Fair*, even though they involve a manipulative woman, still end with her "getting away with it" more or less). The overall impression of the dramas selected as well as the relevant plot of *The Children's Hour* and the damage that occurs after a hidden relationship comes out leads me to believe the ending is one of self-destruction rather than release and transformation, though of course it is quite intentionally ambiguous.

While both Swanwick's story and "Many Mansions" (probably) are female inversions of "The Fifth Head of Cerberus", obviously Swanwick's is much more literally derivative of the events and situations, and posits an entirely different life cycle than that implied in the original novel. Wolfe's subtle treatment make it doubtful that the planet in question in "Many Mansions" is even in the same fictional "solar system" as his earlier novellas, but there are enough details to show that the autochthonous repressed population and the augmented humans of his story are at the very least thematically and symbolically related to his earlier novella, if not in the same fictional universe as St. Anne and St. Croix.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: Is the transfer from humans to their mansions one way or is it a two way street, such that perhaps these houses can come to possess humans again? There seems to be some strange motility to all of the tables as well as the houses themselves. I remain convinced that somehow these houses are luring humans to pollinate them just as the arum does, and the name Beckett with its "bee cottage" resonance kind of solidifies this idea in my mind. The sterile women from Motherworld can still be used to "come into a woman".

Is there really a connection between the worms and vegetation in this story and "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" or does the alien environment involve a completely different life cycle? It seems that the themes are the same but the actual autochthons, perhaps never seen, might not be identical to the aborigines.

How are the caves of the original inhabitants of the planet related to the houses that come later? Do they manifest as whatever the ideal inhabitant would naturally live in as a form of mimicry? Are the houses human technology or alien? Because of the caves and the hint that eating the herbs and worms of the planet attract the houses' attention, I incline toward the belief that they are alien and perhaps even organisms that invite humans into themselves to live symbiotically (as it is possible that the worms and herbs symbiotically invade the humans, as the Shadow Children almost assuredly did on St. Croix in "The Fifth Head of Cerberus", making houses and humans alike the many mansions that support life and become one with their host).

The cryptic ending, while it is clear that the house is animated by Nor's Aunt Enid, remains confusing.

Why are both Enid and Lily named after purity? Is there a relationship between them?

In the final analysis I believe that "Many Mansions" involves a race of mimicking almost flower like houses that lure humans in to pollinate them, especially after they have eaten the natural pollinators, the white/green worms and attract the attention of these "houses". They might very well provide immortality to their human symbiotes, however, and fulfill all these religious promises that the biblical allusions in the text produce.

Marc Aramini — 24 Jul 2014, 02:13 · follows Marc Aramini

That one was a bit more involved than I planned it to be ... oh man. Hope you guys enjoy it. There was almost no commentary on it.

Marc Aramini — 24 Jul 2014, 16:51 · follows Marc Aramini

Two more little things that I think are kind of neat.

Why Halloween? The "things" are dressing up as comfortable houses to attract their pollinators: to Lily the house is a safe, fun brothel; to Pim it is a fireplace to rest, etc. Their mimicry is a kind of costume.

Also, I can't help but wonder about the concept of original sin in a completely in vitro birth. Nor speculates that even if the girl is grown she must still surely have a mother, and I am wondering about the pollination of the mimic houses as a kind of asexual union as well. Note that Nor says she really doesn't believe that human minds are running the houses, though supposedly she is living in one: "If there were people's brains in them (and I've never been sure that was true) then they must have been women's brains mostly." I also feel that the road in Nepo Pass which has been built over the original road on the planet is symbolic of the houses that the settler's construct: they have, in a way, provided a covering, shape, and form to the houses they built, but perhaps they have simply built over and through something much older and more foreign - something using mimicry and disguise to attract humans and lure them in.

Marc Aramini — 24 Jul 2014, 17:43 · follows Marc Aramini

Also note that the House of Enid does not start to creak and rumble until Todd gives the visitor a drink of the harder spirits, which are probably seasoned with the white/green worms - this consumption might catch the house's attention to some degree, as Todd speculates that his drinking brought Pim to the attention of the houses in Nepo Pass.

Enid and Lily can signify purity, and both Todd (Tod) and Dode can mean death - interesting resonances.