

Cues

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 24 May 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 24 May 1998, 14:56

Quite aside from my own contributions, I enjoyed the discussion of "Suzanne Delage." It provided some variety from the discussions of a few major works, especially BOTNS (not that I don't enjoy those); and it allowed people to participate who don't have all the details of BOTNS memorized and don't have time to reread it.

In this spirit, I'd like to see what people think about "Cues." I certainly wouldn't rank it with BOTNS, or even "Suzanne Delage"; but it was selected for Wolfe's first collection (by Wolfe?) and I've always found it somewhat puzzling. My current take on it is that the "bowling balls" are devils, or something of that ilk. The not-so-young man's deal is very much like selling his soul. And the "bowling ball" is evasive about its origins, lies (about having a sense of humor) and makes a Freudian slip about "goblins" in the fourth paragraph. But this doesn't explain why the "bowling balls" perceive each other as "a fair young world, mottled by clouds and rich with life." And is there any significance to the fact that in the next-to-last paragraph (the same one in which that description occurs) Wolfe begins to refer to the "bowling balls" as "he" rather than "it"?

Anyway, that's as far as I've gotten. Anyone have any ideas?

--Adam

Peter Westlake — 26 May 1998, 09:49 · follows adam louis stephanides

At 14:56 1998-05-24 -0500, adam louis stephanides wrote:

In this spirit, I'd like to see what people think about "Cues."

I've wondered about "Cues" too: on the face of it, it could be a straightforward shaggy dog story, existing just to set up the pun; but there are hints of something more.

The galaxy-goblin spaceship isn't the only slip: right at the end the ball says "I bed your pardon". Unless it's a typo, of course. The "Coalstack Nebula" looks like a real joke by the ball, but I'm not sure why coalstacks (chimneys) would be funnier than coal sacks!

I wonder whether the balls really do have a sense of humour, or whether we are seeing them through the n-s-y man's perceptions? But the ball does seem to know how to answer the cue at the end. That's two kinds of cue in the story: if the balls were smaller, we might get a third in somehow.

Peter.

"Doctor, doctor! I keep thinking I'm a billiard ball!"

"I'm sorry, please wait at the end of the ..."

adam louis stephanides — 31 May 1998, 15:53 · follows Peter Westlake

On Tue, 26 May 1998 Peter Westlake wrote:

The galaxy-goblin spaceship isn't the only slip: right at the end the ball says "I bed your pardon". Unless it's a typo, of course.

I had assumed it's a typo, as it doesn't seem to make any sense as written. But I'm not 100% sure.

I wonder whether the balls really do have a sense of humour, or whether we are seeing them through the n-s-y man's perceptions?

In addition to the joke at the end, the way the bowling ball's denial is described strongly implies that it is being evasive.

--Adam

Robert Borski — 05 Jul 1998, 20:42 · follows adam louis stephanides

Time now to consider "Cues," possibly Gene Wolfe's most cryptic short work. It's also extremely scatological if I read it right--wicked, wicked Gene is playing a wicked, wicked joke on you, me and anyone else who's attempted (and usually failed) to decipher his works--so if you're offended by puerile, bathroom-type humor, perhaps you better steer clear of this one.

The premise of "Cues," of course, is not that hard to grasp. Given an infinitude of clues about everything in the universe, it's necessary to screen out the unimportant data, to winnow the chaff from the grain, if we're ever to make sense of anything. Otherwise, we'll have a skewed picture of the universe because our apprehensions are based on the wrong clues--another word for which, obviously, is miscues.

Miscues abound in "Cues," which is why everything seems so nonsensical. We're not seeing the "universe" properly because we're concentrating on, rather than ignoring, the wrong clues. And yet we keep trying to make sense of what's happening, which thereby augments our confusion.

This concept is perhaps best understood in light of the title and its myriad variations throughout the story, the various miscues. The story begins with a "?" This is a misapprehension of "que," the Spanish word for "what." The "not-so-young" man of our story is a coot. The "children" who will inherit his "talent" and become "rich and famous" (i.e., successful), but less so than him, because he is "established" earlier, are cooties. The bowling ball from Deneb is a cooze (Deneb is Arabic for tail). The girl who is beginning to think herself sexy is a cutie. The sports equipment idea the artist gets involves pool cues.

There's also the misapprehension involved with the "cosmic dust, galaxies, nebulae, stars" mention--it's the same error that will be made by "artists who attempt to visualize us as dark sphere's filled with stars." The word we believe we're hearing/conceptualizing here is "firmament," but this is just as wrong as is our reading of the "fair blue world, mottled by clouds and rich with life," i.e., the Earth. GW gives us a better hint of the latter when the bowling bowl asks the not-so-young man, "What do you call this place?" and the latter replies "'Earth,'" with Earth being in nested quote marks. Why is it not simply "Earth"? Because the word we've misapprehended as firmament is actually "fundament" and the "passed Earth" is the same as the artist's doodles (i.e., doodoo).

At the risk of total ridicule, let me now confirm the worse for you: Yes, my friends, "Clues" is about a man going to the bathroom, but as seen by people who are totally clueless as to the nature of what he's doing. Naughty, naughty Gene is tweaking our sensibilities big time here--perhaps even suggesting most of our attempts to intepret him are full of sh*t. Or perhaps that our heads are up our fundaments. (Me being a veritable ostrich of the GI tract, mea maxima culpa.)

As for sf critic John Clute's contention that "Clues" is an example of Gene Wolfe's antic playfulness, and what he calls "joie d'esprit," I think this is admirable--especially since the name of "not-so-young man" in the "bathroom" can almost certainly be worked out to be "John Clute."

Robert Borski/scolex (who came to these thoughts Martin Luther style)

William H. Ansley — 06 Jul 1998, 01:23 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski wrote:

Time now to consider "Cues," possibly Gene Wolfe's most cryptic short work.
It's also extremely scatological if I read it right...

...

This concept is perhaps best understood in light of the title and its myriad variations throughout the story, the various miscues. The story begins with a "?" This is a misapprehension of "que," the Spanish word for "what."

You know, I used to think this too, but it's not so. The story opens with

"Cues?" the young (not really so young any more) man said. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

The first word is the same as the title, so Gene Wolfe playfully collapsed it with the title (even though it is used in quoted speech) resulting in only one initial occurrence of the word "cues." Please note the occurrence of an open double quote in front the title word with no matching close quote on the same line and a close quote after the question mark with no matching open quote (on the same line). I'm really surprised you missed this, considering your obsession with quotes. (Of course, I am going by page 294 of the Pocket Books paperback edition of The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories. Perhaps the copy you read was "corrected" by some over-zealous copy editor.)

This bit of word play may well be in homage to Lewis Carroll, who did something very similar in Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There. The last few words of chapter 3 seem to be missing, but they are the same as (and collapsed with, portmanteau-style) the title of chapter 4.

I think you may be confused about who is relieving him(it)self here. (I know I'll be relieved when this particular discussion is over with! 8->) Although you are not completely clear, I think you are saying that the not-so-young man is on the can. (By the way, could you please favor us with all the dirt on how you "almost certainly" work out that "the name of 'not-so-young man' in the 'bathroom' [is] 'John Clute.'")

But if that's the case, then why is the bowling ball described as being on the throne. (If a chair of massy gold isn't a throne, I'd like to know what is!)

William Ansley

mary whalen — 09 Jul 1998, 21:33 · follows William H. Ansley

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

William Ansley, I'm glad that you reminded me about the part in cues where the first bowling ball talks about the universe being infinite with your question about the universe not being infinitely bright if it is infinitely large and filled with stars. The reason that the universe is not overwhelmed by heat is that it is NOT infinite. This is the currently held scientific belief, and I agree with it. It has been known for many years. It is based on many different observations, but these aren't important.

Another possible, but unlikely, reason would be the fact that even if the universe were infinite in size, it has only existed for around 15 billion years and the light from all but the closest stars hasn't yet reached Earth. Most scientists think this is very unlikely, but I just thought I'd include it as an alternative explanation if you want it.

This point also shows that the not-so-young man is not very smart, along with the ones that you mentioned. More importantly, it is one of the examples that show that the bowling balls are not above lying. This further undermines its flawed assertion about an infinite number of cues being available.

prion