

Short Story 82: The God and His Man

The Urth list — 13 messages, 7 voices, 06 Aug 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6600>

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Marc Aramini — 06 Aug 2014, 18:26

The God and His Man

“The God and His Man” first appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1980.

SUMMARY:

“Once long, long ago, when the Universe was old, the .. god Isid 1000 1000E — came to the world of Zed.” He orbits the planet and sees men and women upon it, and calls a man of Urth to him, a summons which “cannot be disobeyed.” He instructs Man to go down to Zed and look at the men, who herd and farm, and the women, who live in idleness or in toil, just like on Urth.

Man says he will go, but that he will never see his family again without special help, “For the men of Zed are men ... And therefore crueller than any beast.” The god says he seeks to end that cruelty, and gives him a cloak of invisibility called Tarnung and a Maser, against which not even stone can stand.

He is transported to a grove of trees with scarlet flowers, and wanders in “the high, hot lands where men have few laws and many slaves.” After he grows ashamed of killing with Maser, he picks up the local weapon, a crooked sword.

He gathers a group around him and establishes a citadel in the mountains after winning wars. Spears and spells protect it. Here he is surrounded by white domes and fountains, as well as dancers, preoccupied telling stories of war and victory before tiring of them and disappearing.

In the steaming lands, he finds trees taller than his towers and men who fought with stealth and poisoned arrows. He casts his sword into the river, but keeps Maser. He learns the ways of the trees “of which each is an island, with its own dwellers thereon” and the ways of the beasts, who are less clever than men but wiser. He tames a panther and smotes an idol, then vanishes, and a year later returns to rule, and enjoys the life of a chieftain, with war canoes, wives kept pale and beautiful, riding an elephant. He would have stayed there if not for a dream sent by Isid 1000 1000E to seek the cold lands.

There, “the people of the cold lands keep no slaves and have many laws, and their justice is the wonder of strangers; and so he found the bread of the cold lands hard and scant, and for a long time he cleaned boots for it, and for a long time dug ditches to drain their fields.” In order to free himself from this low class and toilsome life, he gets rid of his shovel, cuts a staff, and begins to teach, always beneath a green tree, where he talked of honor, and how it is higher than law, and freedom. “Beside city gates he told stories of the forgotten cities that were and of the forgotten cities that might be, if only men would forget them.” He vanishes from justice, and “many among the youth of the cold lands heard him, and many feigned to follow his teachings, and a few did follow them and lived strange lives.”

Then Isid 1000 1000E drew him up “as the puppeteer lifts his doll” when the snow starts, and he finds himself young again before the god, though his cunning is gone.

The god asked which of the three peoples loved him and why Man loved them. He says that the people of the hot lands are unjust without falsity, helping friends and crushing foes, living without trust. The cold lands people are just but somewhat unlovable, and the steaming lands are innocent of the concept of justice, following their hearts, and he loved them best of all.

The god claims that the people of the cold lands are the closest to his heart, and that in time the steaming land must fall to one or the other. Man pictures the people of the cold lands subjugating the natural world, and “though they took no slaves [driving] the people of the steaming lands behind certain fences and walls, where they sat in the dust until they died.”

Here the Man thinks that in the hot lands, even though the people of the steaming lands would have suffered and worked as slaves, some could be happy.

Isid says, “It is better a man should die than be a slave.” The Man kills the god with Maser, and the end questions what happened to man, and who guards his citadel or sends the arrows of the steaming land.

“But it may be that all these things now are passed, or they are things of long ago, when the Universe was old and there were more gods.”

COMMENTARY: Each of the lands, the hot, steamy, and cold, corresponds to a type of society. Man experiences each type starting from the bottom and ascending to the top. (He follows this pattern on the ship of Isid 1000 1000E as well — starting as servant and ending as master).

The hot lands involved a rigid system that was primitive in its attitudes, with both slaves and rulers, and his prowess at war allowed him to build an opulent retreat like a pleasure palace, perhaps reminiscent of ancient Greece or Rome, where there is definite class separation and slaves as well as some civilization. Man calls them unjust without falsity. The people here seem devoid of religious sentiment, so it does not quite fit with an Aztec or Mayan structure, though the class structure might resemble those civilizations at times.

The steamy lands involve a population reminiscent of some of the more nomadic Native Americans or pygmy forest populations, and rather than ascend to power through killing, he puts aside his heavy sword and destroys an idol, setting himself up in its place, where he enjoys a primitive but free existence as something like a tribal chief — here, his power is gained through more mystical ends and he can do what he wants to do — there is freedom.

In the cold lands, he becomes trapped in a story of low mimesis — an ordinary man doing ordinary things. His only escape is to do use philosophy, religion, and mysticism to talk of things beyond the laws. Here, this spiritual devotion to higher ideals like freedom and honor allow him to escape a life of labor, but he is at odds with the society, even though he is “on top” of his followers. Only those mystical eccentricities grant him escape, and he sees that if the people of the cold land win they will destroy the freedom of seeking the hearts desire — the images Wolfe employs are fairly similar to the subjugation of the Native American tribes in the United States, shunted and penned in to small areas while “no slaves are taken”.

The best system for Man was one where he could follow his heart, a natural one where mysticism rather than war could triumph, but one where honor and freedom were not curtailed by excessive laws and burdensome jobs — the story rejects the modern world in favor of a

much more primitive one.

The mixture of hot (passionate and alive but not free) and cold (governed by laws and “justice” but still somehow not free) creates the steam (the people follow their hearts free of the concerns of true civilization).

Since the god Isid 1000 1000E here represents extreme order and justice, he also comes to represent an almost ironic impediment to freedom and individuality. Man destroys him and completes his ascension from bottom to top, though clearly Isid 1000 000E is another man made construct which has assumed the power of a “god”, even though it pays lip service to justice and to eliminating cruelty.

The death of Isid is surprising from the pen of the Catholic Gene Wolfe, but perhaps more inherent in the rebellion of Man is the rejection of the modern world, with its overarching rules and spirit killing jobs — freedom is destroyed. Isid is more like a future outgrowth of society, a man made computer God, than a mystical one who cherishes true free will to follow the heart.

It has been claimed that this is one of the stories from the brown book in *The Book of the New Sun*.

Urth is named after the goddess of fate who personified the past, and the ending substantiates this naming system — these events happened long ago, and since then artificial gods have been cast down.

In his comments in *The Best of Gene Wolfe*, Wolfe states:

This is a story of which I cannot say anything of real substance. On its first publication, the word *maser* was changed by the proof-reader (I was told, at least, that it was by the proofreader) to *master*. Not all the time, only sometimes The stories of other writers have suffered worse things, but when I read this one — I can focus on nothing else. Most of you will already know what a maser is: a microwave amplifier. Let us say you have this microwave, one that will scarcely hold a sixteen-inch frozen pizza. With a maser, you could make it a great big house-sized thing you might induce a proofreader to walk into ?

It is likely Tarnung was capable of affecting light waves. It is German for camouflage or disguise.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

“The God and His Man” resembles the short fantasy fables of Lord Dunsany, and never seems to reach the level of allegory.

I do feel that Northrop Frye's nomenclature would be useful in looking at the cultures present on Zed, such that we could see high mimesis in the hot lands where people can forge their own destiny, possibly mythic strains in the steaming lands, and low mimesis in the cold lands where ordinary people are trapped in mundane and banal tasks with little chance of escape except rejecting the system and becoming outcasts.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

While Zed is the French for the letter Z, implying a kind of finality, is there any significance to Isid 1000 1000E besides resembling a serial number? It is said that he has other names.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe's critique of the modern world continues in "Four Wolves" and "Redwood Coast Roamer", but the attitude of a ruler who understands his subjects needs poorly will be repeated in the gods of the Whorl. This story is slightly more didactic than some of Wolfe's other literary myths, like "Love Among the Corridors" or "At the Point of Capricorn."

Yves Meynard — 06 Aug 2014, 23:52 · follows Marc Aramini

When it comes to the god's name, I never read it as "Isid 1000 1000 E" but as "Isid looo looo E". "looo looo" would be a "double looo", or W, which would yield "ICWE" as the original name, whose meaning has been corrupted. I find no obvious candidates on the web for the meaning of this acronym. "Integrated Circuit" was once a common meaning of IC. Does W stand in for Weapon? Or is there a Wolf(e) involved?

Gwern Branwen — 07 Aug 2014, 00:03 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On Wed, Aug 6, 2014 at 2:26 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:
It is likely Tarnung was capable of affecting light waves. It is German for camouflage or disguise.

Tarnung is likely a Ring reference to the Tarnhelm, which grants invisibility. Given that the other magic item is a maser which creates waves of coherent straight radiation, the Tarnung probably bends light to achieve invisibility.

The Ring cycle would be an interesting theme to bring in, as it too involves the fall of gods.

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

Marc Aramini — 07 Aug 2014, 00:34 · in reply to Yves Meynard

I have a vague feeling he might be more like an appliance, like a sentient microwave or oven or something, but I have no real reason to believe this.

On Wed, Aug 6, 2014 at 4:52 PM, Yves Meynard <meynard at videotron.ca> wrote:
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Marc Aramini — 07 Aug 2014, 00:47 · in reply to Yves Meynard

Then again. the only thing more difficult than interpreting some of Wolfe's more obscure stuff is deciphering the lyrics to Louie Louie by The Kingsmen/Richard Berry - maybe this story combines the two in the ultimate mess of indecipherability. A radio stuck on Louie Louie.

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Mo Holkar — 07 Aug 2014, 09:23 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

At 01:03 07/08/2014, Gwern wrote:

On Wed, Aug 6, 2014 at 2:26 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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The Ring cycle would be an interesting theme to bring in, as it too involves the fall of gods.

A thought that's just occurred -- is it possible that the name "Tarnung" indicates a response of sorts to the Glimmung (which means roughly "brightness") in Philip K. Dick's novel Galactic Pot-Healer? This is also about a human man sent on a mission to an alien planet by a godlike being, and its themes (conformity vs creativity, the need to obey gods or not) are such as might have resonated with Wolfe.

best,

Mo

Marc Aramini — 07 Aug 2014, 12:21 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

I always wonder at how much is direct reference and how much is zeitgeist. Wolfe almost never mentions Dick as an influence, and once, because of the religious forces at work in Dune, said Dune had little to no impact on his writing. I have read a fair amount of Dick (my favorite is Flow My Tears the Policeman Said because of the lonely woman's take on pets, if I remember right, and Ubik was pretty good) but not galactic pot healer.

And to be honest part of the reason I never read it is probably a reaction to the title - I am trying to imagine 60 year old Wolfe reading a book with "galactic pot healer" on the cover.

On Thursday, August 7, 2014, Mo Holkar <mo at holkar.net> wrote:

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Brad Henry — 07 Aug 2014, 12:34 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Marc,

If you could--and just out of curiosity--what did Wolfe mean by the 'religious forces at work' in Dune, and why would that have meant Dune would not have left an impact on him?

On Thu, Aug 7, 2014 at 8:21 AM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:
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Marc Aramini — 07 Aug 2014, 12:55 · in reply to Brad Henry

Some asked him about how much of an impact or influence Dune had on him and his writing, referring to the praxis of religious thought with the Freman (all these prophecies and gene scheming plans to produce a "foretold" but ultimately secular power who controls a world with a religion he did not grow up in, etc.) and Wolfe simply said little to none.

On Thu, Aug 7, 2014 at 5:34 AM, Brad Henry <bradhenry101 at gmail.com> wrote:

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Mo

Mo Holkar — 07 Aug 2014, 15:15 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Well, Wolfe was only 38 when Galactic Pot-Healer came out: and I think most serious SF readers in the late 60s would have been keeping up with Dick's output, as he was doing some very interesting things with the form.

I expect you're right, though: the zeitgeist is a strong factor.

(I'm interested now to know what Wolfe thinks and thought of Dick's work. Is that on record in any of the interviews etc?)

best,

Mo

At 13:21 07/08/2014, you wrote:

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Gwern Branwen — 07 Aug 2014, 15:47 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On Thu, Aug 7, 2014 at 11:15 AM, Mo Holkar <mo at holkar.net> wrote:
(I'm interested now to know what Wolfe thinks and thought of Dick's work. Is that on record in any of the interviews etc?)

Dicken doesn't seem to come up much. In the one hit in the copies I have:

TimOPod: gene:do you think phillip k dick is under rated..or even over looked

...

GeneWolfe: PKDick: I'm going to say yes. That's debatable, but I'm going to say yes.

Herbert came up in the same session though:

GUSRADIO: Gene do you feel you were influenced by Frank Herert at all?

...

GeneWolfe: Frank Herbert: Little or none.

Might be more hits on Urth.net but you'll have to struggle through all the hits for Emily Dickinson and Charles Dickens.

gwern
<http://www.gwern.net>

jbarach at aol.com — 07 Aug 2014, 21:15 · in reply to Marc Aramini

... and Gene Wolfe is fully capable of writing about sentient appliances, as "Frostfree" makes clear....

John

-----Original Message-----

From: Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net> Sent: Wed, Aug 6, 2014 7:34 pm Subject: Re: (urth) Short Story 82: The God and His Man

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Richard Simon — 08 Aug 2014, 11:15 · in reply to Marc Aramini

"Isid iooo ioiooooo" is the sound of static heard on a radio.

On Friday, 8 August 2014, 14:32, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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