

Short Story 86: The Last Day

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 08 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 08 Aug 2014, 12:30

The Last Day

“The Last Day” first appeared in **Speculations** in 1982 and is collected in **Storeys from the Old Hotel**.

SUMMARY: The emotional power of the story is found in the ceremony enacted by the Priest, so I recommend readers definitely read it in lieu of my poor summary. A robot called The Priest enacts a ritual of worship to an ever decreasing robotic congregation. They worship the “Image of Man” in a very Catholic ceremony before a huge machine comes to wreck the Cathedral. The Priest resists and contacts a mobile terminal, which tells him the space is needed. The Priest implies this destruction will negate the need for any space. The huge machine rolls forward to crush the Priest, and the machine stops it with an energy beam, claiming the right to such power. A New Priest arrives and watches the Priest perform his final ceremony before stating that a new cathedral will be erected to worship their own kind, and the large machine proceeds to destroy the sanctuary and the boy and girl kept alive within it. The New Priest says, “You see — you believed that the world would end. It has not.” The fallen Priest claims that “it has.”

COMMENTARY:

The ceremonies which so resemble the ritualistic worship of the Catholic Church show that the machines once venerated their creators as divine, but the influence of this belief dwindled. Rather than presented as blasphemous or fallen, the Priest serves a worthy cause — preserving the last vital remains of man. Of course the New Priest wants to venerate the work of the machines instead, and the story is a critique of worshiping the work of our own hands and human ingenuity (which, of course, would bring about the machines that here eradicate the last humans).

The message (and the metaphor) is clear: the meaning we imbue life without a spiritual element is transitory and fleeting — the world is lost when there is no veneration of something higher. The Priest speaks of knowledge which transcends programming: “Our data — You are only a mobile terminal. Yet you have data — yes, even you — beyond that of those you serve.” When the mobile terminal claims to serve the great ones, The Priest replies, “And I the small ones who are greater than the great ones — the small ones whom the great ones serve, though they have forgotten it.”

There is a rather ironic thematic effect, however: The Priest is correct to worship and preserve Man, which gives him the authority to wield power above and beyond that of his peers, but the implication is that we would be imprudent to worship ourselves and declare the spaces of worship useless, figuratively “destroying” God, as the machine callously crushes the skull and limbs of the twitching boy.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

The religious elements at work, creating a parallel between man's hubris with the increasing certainty that God does not matter and the actual murder of the last humans by machines, are clear. Wolfe's most obvious religious works such as "The Detective of Dreams", his Sun books, and some scenes in **Pirate Freedom** are rarely so free of ambiguity. The power of this story is purely emotional, using the religious ceremonies of Catholicism and worship in contrast to the final pathetic image of the last boy crushed under a machine.