

Overthinking/Underthinking "The Fifth Head of Cerberus"

The Urth list — 24 messages, 5 voices, 11 Aug 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6612>

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 11 Aug 2014, 18:44

I think an important point is being missed here. People keep treating "A Story" as if it were reliable. Give some thought to who wrote it and why and then decide whether (and to what extent) you think it's reliable.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Marc Aramini — 11 Aug 2014, 18:59 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

It is Marsch's origin story overlain on the historical tale.

There is a wonderful scene where the cat is running around trying to bite him in the third novella and he narrowly escapes, and both the audience and Marsch are unaware of the severe consequences of the bite, giving him a few more days. He is bitten on the major Rogation Day.

On Mon, Aug 11, 2014 at 11:44 AM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Marc Aramini — 11 Aug 2014, 19:02 · in reply to Marc Aramini

The end of "A Story" hinges on a very ambiguous switch: indeterminacy between Lander and aboriginal, indeterminacy between Eastwind and Sandwalker. Though of course in the final analysis it is Eastwind and the abos who actually survive, though both groups believe them to be the other Sandwalker and the Landers.

The switch for Eastwind is a bite, and in that way it tells the origin story of the shadow child Marsch. This is the climax of A Story, and the climax of the origin as well.

On Mon, Aug 11, 2014 at 11:59 AM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Marc Aramini — 11 Aug 2014, 19:03 · in reply to Marc Aramini

... believe themselves to be the other, Sandwalker and the Landers.

That ending probably makes more sense grammatically.

On Mon, Aug 11, 2014 at 12:02 PM, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com> wrote:

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

David Stockhoff — 12 Aug 2014, 22:49 · follows Marc Aramini

On 8/12/2014 12:20 PM, Lee wrote:

Third, your post implies that "simpler is better" a premise I don't think holds true in fiction. Looking at the entire body of Wolfe's

work, are we really expected to always find the simplest answer possible? Is his fiction really meant to be a science laboratory with Occam's Razor as our primary tool of understanding?

A complex explanation should explain more, better, than the simple one it replaces. In this case, the apparent possibility of two races is maddening, and especially because it seems binary.

But were there not two waves of colonization on the planets? Two planets to evolve on? Seems to me a single imitative species that evolves twice or even splits into two or more fits this very well---after all, when has there ever been a migration where there were not those left behind? And "two worlds" or "twins" (not quite like one another) has always been a Wolfean motif. A single alien species (and a single human contingent) isn't enough. But . . .

It seems to me that 5HC is most forcefully about two coexisting worlds. Not two planets, but the one we see and the real one: at a minimum, a /doubling /of perspectives. The two waves on the two worlds suggests two waves of something else. (If not four.)

---We see French colonizers and think of European seizure of the New World; what do the natives see? Prey? Gods?

---We see another wave of colonists and gunships; what do the natives see? Themselves? Their old selves and the new? Parasites?

---What do the French colonists see when their fellow Euros arrive? (if they are still French?)

I agree with Gerry that humans-to-SC and natives-to-abos is simpler. It's almost TOO simple. It's like a first-order (i.e., second-level) twist in a colonial narrative where the white men become worse-than-natives and the savage natives prove themselves better-than-(white)men. What's needed here is a narrative theory with at least two orders of "twist." Maybe even five, as Marc hints.

Marc's mites theory is factually compelling and has the requisite story-twisted-to-the-fourth-power, but I admit I can't stand it. It has no meaning for me. This leaves me stuck in the same limbo where the did-inhumi-really-fly-between-worlds problem left me: I'm sentimentally attached to an interpretation that yields some scrap of meaning for me. In this case, that means a doubling of everything. The theory Gerry rejects feels better to me, and it allows one species to be a parasite on the other as well as other possibilities.

Lee — 13 Aug 2014, 12:44 · follows David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff: But were there not two waves of colonization on the planets?

I think the first human contact in the system was the crash of one starship. I think the first human source material the native imitative creatures had to work with was dying or even dead humans. (perhaps only their spirits?).

Hence the massive imperfection of Shadow Children as imitative copies of humans. They struggle with even the basic (to us) concept that a person = one individual. When Sandwalker and the Old Wise One are in the pit together, they try to touch each other at different times and each time the Shadow Child proves too insubstantial and passes right through Sandwalker's body.

We are given a story that chewing a certain weed has changed humans into Shadow Children.

Maybe we can accept that stunted growth and bowed legs could be the result of such a thing. Shining eyes and telepathic powers are a lot more questionable. And intangibility seems too much of a task to ask of any weed.

Conversely, if Shadow Children are indeed the offspring or product of shadowy, native beings, everything about Shadow Children makes sense to me. Their name, their imperfect human form, their telepathy, their pluralism and their intangibility are all explained.

The Old Wise One also makes a comment about them being there when men first arrived. He then admits he is confused and doesn't know which story is true. With this, I think Wolfe is clearly giving his readers the choice of which story to believe. And, as this discussion demonstrates, some of his readers prefer one story and others prefer the other.

We see French colonizers and think of European seizure of the New World; what do the natives see? Prey? > Gods?

A bit of both? The most sincere form of flattery is imitation?

Colonization is criticized for imposing a foreign culture on native peoples. But then we notice the British have the habit of drinking tea and eating curry and the whole Euro-centric world eating Asian and Latino inspired foods and dancing to music based on African rhythms, not to mention the massive waves of

direct immigration of people from the Third World" to the "First World". Who and what do the Abos represent in our modern world?

Marc's mites theory is factually compelling and has the requisite story-twisted-to-the-fourth-power, but > I admit I can't stand it.

I think Marc often zooms so far ahead we are all left eating his dust. Sigh...I admire him, even if it is only his tail lights I am able to see, sometimes.

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I hope I am allowed some license to be a cynic here. Is it "meaning" or "entertainment" you receive when you think about those cool hordes of Inhumis soaring across the void between planets?

I ask because I will recognize one of my own personal biases here. Many people (around the world) enjoy the antics of "The Trickster", the fictional (and sometimes real world) character who is able to tell an implausible story so entertainingly that it becomes fun to believe it. My bias is that I am not so entertained by "The Trickster". And when I feel the deceit is being done to hurt or take advantage of others, I react rather violently against the process. Even fictional characters in this vein can get me boiling a bit.

Thus, once I had identified the Inhumis as tricksters and liars I was primed to disbelieve anything about them that smelled fishy. For me, the story of flying between planets isn't harmless fun. It is part of the disguise of their "stowaway" transportation strategy, which facilitates the galactic spread of a harmful, manipulative parasitic, blood-sucking species. Like the Abos, they will infiltrate your family and your society and take over, without you knowing it. Given that, I just can't find the fun in the lies of the Inhumis..(okay, okay, settle down...it's just a story.....)

Gerry Quinn — 13 Aug 2014, 14:56 · in reply to Lee

On 13/08/2014 13:44, Lee wrote:

I think the first human contact in the system was the crash of one starship. I think the first human source material the native imitative

creatures had to work with was dying or even dead humans. (perhaps only their spirits?). Hence the massive imperfection of Shadow Children as imitative copies of humans. They struggle with even the basic (to us) concept that a person = one individual. When Sandwalker and the Old Wise One are in the pit together, they try to touch each other at different times and each time the Shadow Child proves too insubstantial and passes right through Sandwalker's body.

But The Old Wise One is NOT a Shadow Child. He is not physical, but created from the consciousness of the nearby Shadow Children and (as an increasing proportion) Sandwalker. It's very clear that the Shadow Children are solid humanoid creatures (if they were not, they would provide unsatisfying meals for the Marshmen), and that the Old Wise One (whom Sandwalker first assumes to be a ghost, and who notes that once he was sometimes called the Group Norm) is different.

We are given a story that chewing a certain weed has changed humans into Shadow Children. Maybe we can accept that stunted growth and bowed legs could be the result of such a thing. Shining eyes and telepathic powers are a lot more questionable. And intangibility seems too much of a task to ask of any weed.

The effects don't extend to intangibility. But telepathy creates the intangible Old Wise One.

Conversely, if Shadow Children are indeed the offspring or product of shadowy, native beings, everything about Shadow Children makes sense to me. Their name, their imperfect human form, their telepathy, their pluralism and their intangibility are all explained. The Old Wise One also makes a comment about them being there when men first arrived. He then admits he is confused and doesn't know which story is true. With this, I think Wolfe is clearly giving his readers the choice of which story to believe. And, as this discussion demonstrates, some of his readers prefer one story and others prefer the other.

And his confusion only starts as the Shadow Children are eliminated and Sandwalker forms an increasing part of his consciousness.

This is all made quite explicit in the text.

- Gerry Quinn

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 13 Aug 2014, 20:23 · in reply to Lee

I like your explanation for the "two" species, at least as a "surface" explanation (which really is a subsurface explanation, but then this is Wolfe). It's exactly the kind of thing I was thinking of.

And your point about "entertainment" is exactly correct. Of course, what entertains us and what entertains Gene Wolfe appears to be not entirely the same.

As you say, you do have to stop and consider what he was trying to do. We have a standard sc-fi-as-retelling-of-20th-century-history, which is completely fake. It feels like the old joke of a movie set for a Western that consists entirely of facades that fall down when you shoot at them. It's so fake it doesn't even work as a fake. Then we have a sci-fi under-story which is itself quite shaky. And so on.

On Wednesday, August 13, 2014 8:45 AM, Lee <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

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Lee — 14 Aug 2014, 14:51 · follows DAVID STOCKHOFF

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An interesting theory. I like it! It does explain why the Old Wise One is intangible while the others can be eaten. I must wonder why Sandwalker would start to be incorporated in this telepathic construct when he doesn't chew the weed, and isn't the same species as Shadow Children. I think Sandwalker's incorporation would be evidence that Abos and Shadow Children are of the same original, telepathic species.

Then there is that name. "Shadow Children" too perfectly describes an origin from shadowy, shapeless beings and in no way indicates a human origin. Given the body of Wolfe's work, I find that names can be more important clues to the solution of mysteries than pages and pages of text.

And his confusion only starts as the Shadow Children are eliminated and Sandwalker forms an increasing part of his consciousness

Is it increased confusion or increased clarity? We can't know for sure. We

are given two scenarios and a choice.

Gerry Quinn — 16 Aug 2014, 16:39 · in reply to Lee

On Fri, 1 Aug 2014 09:07:24 , Lee wrote:

//> /Gerry Quinn: But The Old Wise One is NOT a Shadow Child. He is not physical, /

//>/but created from the consciousness of the nearby Shadow Children and (as an

/>)/increasing proportion) Sandwalker. It's very clear that the Shadow /

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//>///>/was sometimes called the Group Norm) is different. /

//An interesting theory. I like it!

What do you think of my theory that Mr. Million is an electronic simulation? Because I thought up that in the same way. It's simply what Wolfe tells us.

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//while the others can be eaten. I must wonder why Sandwalker would
start to be
//incorporated in this telepathic construct when he doesn't chew the
weed, and
//isn't the same species as Shadow Children.

Recall the speech of the Old Wise One when he speaks of the two peoples
- the ones who "used their hands, when they had hands, only to take food", and the others who
"crossed from star to star". "Then if was found that the first heard the songs of the second and
sent them out again, greater than before. Then the second felt thir songs more strongly in all
their bones - but touched, perhaps by the first."

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Maybe so, but the story tells us otherwise.

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 16 Aug 2014, 20:08 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

I should stop, but I just can't.

The story also tells us Victor falls to his death ... I actually believe what the story tells me there.

You see how you have to admit that some scenes are fabrications or unreliable to proceed, and
even you aren't immune from dismissing whole scenes that are clearly depicted in the text?

You are likely to say that is the ONLY scene because it serves a narrative purpose. I believe that
the tree reaching for Victor, the mites that infect people, the shadow children riding up from the
mud in currents, the damaged legs of the young firl and the paralyzed legs of Aunt Jeanine, the
climactic bite in A Story, and the symbolism of shadow children riding the shoulders of Marsh
men all serve a narrative purpose too.

On Sat, Aug 16, 2014 at 9:39 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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Gerry Quinn — 16 Aug 2014, 23:17 · in reply to Marc Aramini

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But we have clues right from the start. The handwriting in the journal changes (the last line written by the real Marsch was "I think I would shoot them both"). The journal relates that Marsch was bitten by the cat. The officer compares the writing with Victor's school composition book right *before* this point. A few entries later, Victor admits he has been lying about the dates, in the very same entry that he claims the boy is dead.

Item: The green eyes of the Marsch who visits No. 5. Marsch earlier claims in his journal that Victor has "startling green eyes" (and he doesn't say "greener than mine"). We see green eyes later as an abo signifier in "A Story" - the point is veritably hammered in.

Item: "I needed only to make my voice like his and look older."

Item: When (in prison) he writes of his bad handwriting, he says "my mother would take my trousers to the river, walking upstream for hours to get away from the sewers, leaving me ashamed and afraid, with an old blanket or a torn piece of sail wrapped around me". Who can be writing this other than the boy Victor?

The thing is, these are all 'hard' clues that point towards a specific interpretation. The clues you cite are heavily interpreted by you, and some of the leaps you make seem to be of questionable foundation. Consider "the damaged legs of the young girl". Phaedria had a broken ankle, which was expected to heal in the normal way. She played a cripple in the play the children put on, "[because her] ankle would not be mended in time for our performance". Other girls - including Marydol - acted in the play, and presumably did not play cripples. Subsequently, Phaedria was agile enough to participate in a burglary.

You have to assume that Wolfe's characters are completely delusional even when conscious, and that the story is told, like that of Loyal To The Group Of Seventeen, in terms of symbology with no causal attachment to the overt meaning of the text. The problem is, we can easily generate a storm of such symbolism from any text.

I don't think such symbolism works if it contradicts the text.

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 16 Aug 2014, 23:54 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Okay, but Rue d'asticot, staff like and stork like legs on the girls on St Croix and a heron like walk to Abos, the name port mimizon (sounds like mimicry) Which just happens to be organized after a hand with fingers and a thumb, the talk of a bite possibly switching eastwind and Sandwalker in a story by stuff swimming in their veins and Marsch also being bitten on the last possible Friday/rogation day before Easter Sunday when the journal starts up again don't seem like coincidence to me.

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Gerry Quinn — 17 Aug 2014, 14:36 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 17/08/2014 00:54, Marc Aramini wrote:

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Which just happens to be organized after a hand with fingers and a thumb, the talk of a bite possibly switching eastwind and Sandwalker in a story by stuff swimming in their veins and Marsch also being bitten on the last possible friday/rogation day before Easter Sunday when the journal starts up again don't seem like coincidence to me.

Where do you get Easter Sunday from? If the cat bit him on a Friday, according to the (fake) dates in the journal, not much happened on the Sunday.

If you accept connections that loose, you will find millions in every direction.

Wolfe is a somewhat psychologically realistic writer; his characters use metaphor and figurative imagery, and do not always speak literally. In Science Fiction, this is arguably a dangerous game to play, because there is not the same grounding in the real world to instantly identify figures as such. The reader is forced to make some added effort to keep the levels of explanation and causality in their appropriate places.

The clues I posted, they are 'hard' clues, as in a detective story. They have a single implication and they cannot be mistaken for metaphor. I think the opposite is the case for what you are taking as clues. And what is the status of the others, in your interpretation? Why does the officer compare the handwriting of Marsch's journal just before the alleged cat bite with the school composition book, and nod to himself? That bit has no figurative meaning, it's a straightforward pointer to the fact that Victor started writing the journal at this point. Why do you think Wolfe wrote this paragraph?

I noted several other such instances (and I forgot the woman, likely Victor's mother, in the adjacent cell, though this is less definitive anyway).

I don't see how one can ignore these and instead divine the truth of the story from the shape of a continent or the walk of a woman!

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 17 Aug 2014, 17:16 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

I understand why you won't accept them, but it would be impossible for me to make those kind of connections to specific repetitive descriptions (staff/stork/heron-like/leg injuries or paralyzation/abo girl expressing chagrin over travelling far by foot) in an alien's leg and a human's leg in, say, Rama II or any other book by Wolfe. How many cities do you know that are specifically identified by the parts of a hand and just happen to have streets named after larva and cities named after mimicry? If you think that's random, cool. I understand, but I certainly couldn't make those kinds of extremely specific associations in any other work. Let's just agree to disagree

On Sun, Aug 17, 2014 at 7:36 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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Gerry Quinn — 18 Aug 2014, 07:57 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 17/08/2014 18:16, Marc Aramini wrote:

I understand why you won't accept them, but it would be impossible for me to make those kind of connections to specific repetitive descriptions (staff/stork/heron-like/leg injuries or paralyzation/abo girl expressing chagrin over travelling far by foot) in an alien's leg and a human's leg in, say, Rama II or any other book by Wolfe. How many cities do you know that are specifically identified by the parts of a hand and just happen to have streets named after larva and cities named after mimicry? If you think that's random, cool. I understand, but I certainly couldn't make those kinds of extremely specific associations in any other work. Let's just agree to disagree

But are these associations really specific when you examine them? Seven Girls Waiting is reluctant to travel a long distance, but she has recently given birth and has been starving. She goes anyway, and later follows Sandwalker down the river. Her legs are fine. Phaedria explicitly has a broken ankle, and there are other girls whose play-acting is not restricted to playing cripples. Aunt Jeannine has some unspecified disability, for which she uses a high-tech solution which shocked No. 5 (so it cannot be commonplace). There's nothing to suggest most women don't walk normally. And Victor's mother, an abo, walked miles upstream to wash his clothes.

You notice women with some temporary or permanent issue and ignore all those who walk normally. And how much sense does the "womens legs" association make anyway?

Port-Mimizon has some letters in common with 'mimicry' - that doesn't mean it's named after it. And where does mimicry come in anyway, if you are replacing mimicry with some kind of infection?

Parts of the geography of Sainte Croix are named after a hand (there are headlands referencing thumb and fingers). But think about this: what does a hand signify but humans? - if it symbolises anything, it is the opposite of the symbolism you are loading onto it! Veil told us the truth about Veil's Hypothesis. It is only an excuse - there is no reason to hypothesise a takeover by alien monsters, because humans are monstrous enough. If the hand shaped continent on Sainte Croix has any symbolism, this is the level it exists at. It's not telling us a secret clue about maggots or some other SF element. The SF story exists on its own level, with its own level of clues, and the symbolism of The Hand exists at a different level.

I ask again, why does the officer nod when he compares the handwriting? Can you think of any conceivable reason Wolfe wrote that other than to make it clear to the reader that Victor started writing the journal at this point?

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 18 Aug 2014, 13:45 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry only the one guy was a shadow child infection. Everybody else is an abo mimic in port mimizon. Marsch and number five are the odd man out.

That's why it's port mimizon, just mimicking humanity. Two different life cycles. Do you not understand what I have been saying? Your question about the name of port mimizon being irrelevant is mind blowing. Everyone there is an abo. Except Marsch and number five. I want to stop but then you ask a question like that indicating you have no idea what my position is.

On Monday, August 18, 2014, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 18 Aug 2014, 13:50 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Gerry, someone took Marsch's place, that's why the officer nodded at the handwriting, it just wasn't who is commonly perceived to have taken Marsch's place. Marsch is not the same man, he is dead, taken over by the collective shadow child infection, who are many but fade into one lonely

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- Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn — 18 Aug 2014, 14:20 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 18/08/2014 14:50, Marc Aramini wrote:
Gerry, someone took Marsch's place, that's why the officer nodded at the handwriting, it just wasn't who is commonly perceived to have taken Marsch's place. Marsch is not the same man, he is dead, taken over by the collective shadow child infection, who are many but fade into one lonely

He didn't just nod at the handwriting in the journal, though. He went looking for Victor's school composition book and inspected the first few pages. *Then* he nodded.

- Gerry Quinn

Lee — 19 Aug 2014, 13:31 · follows Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn: What do you think of my theory that Mr. Million is an electronic simulation? Because I thought up that in the same way. It's simply what

Wolfe tells us.

A nice theory! I like it! Interesting that you use the word "simply". Had you considered that there might be more to the story? For example that Mr. Million might also be the origin of the cloned chain which includes #5 and Maitre?

Were you familiar with the theory that the family name is actually "Gene Wolfe"? What might that symbolize?

Recall the speech of the Old Wise One when he speaks of the two peoples
- the ones who "used their hands, when they had hands, only to take food", and the others who "crossed from star to star". "Then if was found that the first heard the songs of the second and sent them out again, greater than before.

Yes, I think this refers to telepathic Shadow Children (who sometimes have hands)

and human astronauts whose thoughts are picked up as they travel through space.

Maybe so, but the story tells us otherwise.

But, as previously noted, there is no "the" one story. There are multiple stories

which must be pieced together. I don't think the interweaving is meant to be "simple".

You have to assume that Wolfe's characters are completely delusional even when conscious, and that the story is told, like that of Loyal To The Group Of Seventeen, in terms of symbology with no causal attachment to the overt meaning of the text.

Excellent analogy! If we change "No causal attachment" to "indirect causal attachment".

I don't think such symbolism works if it contradicts the text.

Who wrote the story told by "Loyal To The Group Of 17"? Gene Wolfe right? Perhaps he is revealing his larger literary style in such smaller synecdoche.

Is "Number Five" in any way an unreliable narrator? What is Gene Wolfe saying about himself in giving "Number Five" the name of Gene Wolfe?

The problem is, we can easily generate a storm of such symbolism from any text.

If you accept connections that loose, you will find millions in every direction.

These are grave literary accusations to make against another human being. I can't speak for Marc but I can personally assure you that I don't find hidden messages about aliens in the instructions on how to assemble a shelving set. Nor do I find secret clues about mythological gods in the ingredient list on my cereal box.

On the other hand, I do find hidden references to 1950's McCarthyism in the play The Crucible which is about Salem Witch Hunts even though the name "McCarthy" is never mentioned in the text. I look at Picasso's Guernica and see cartoon cows and horses and people, yet I think it refers to the 1937 bombing of a Basque town.

Likewise I find reference to Adolph Hitler in the Chaplin film The Great Dictator. In Gulliver's Travel's I find secret references to 18th Century British society, even though Whigs, Tories, Protestants, Catholics and France are not mentioned once in the text.

Am I really to ignore all possible deeper interpretations of artwork because the reference are not found in the main body of the medium? Am I really to accept the words of someone on the

internet who tells me that if they don't see something in a work of art then it doesn't exist?

I could. But I think I would be missing a lot. "Art Must Be Taken Only At Face Value" is not a club I care to join.

Gerry Quinn — 19 Aug 2014, 14:38 · in reply to Lee

On 19/08/2014 14:31, Lee wrote:

Gerry Quinn: What do you think of my theory that Mr. Million is an electronic simulation? Because I thought up that in the same way. It's simply what Wolfe tells us.

A nice theory! I like it! Interesting that you use the word "simply". Had you considered that there might be more to the story? For example that Mr. Million might also be the origin of the cloned chain which includes #5 and Maitre?

I think it's highly plausible, since presumably the scanning was done on earth, where cloning of this kind is illegal. I don't think it's explicitly stated, though.

Were you familiar with the theory that the family name is actually "Gene Wolfe"? What might that symbolize?

Nothing much - a kind of joke that Wolfe may have inserted elsewhere.

Recall the speech of the Old Wise One when he speaks of the two peoples - the ones who "used their hands, when they had hands, only to take food", and the others who "crossed from star to star". "Then if was found that the first heard the songs of the second and sent them out again, greater than before.

Yes, I think this refers to telepathic Shadow Children (who sometimes have hands) and human astronauts whose thoughts are picked up as they travel through space.

That is incompatible with what the Old Wise One says, and with much else. I don't think I need to rehearse why yet again.

Maybe so, but the story tells us otherwise.

But, as previously noted, there is no "the" one story. There are multiple stories which must be pieced together. I don't think the interweaving is meant to be "simple".

There are stories you have invented, but they don't appear in the text. You can argue that the Old Wise One is confused at one point as to which of the two peoples in the story is which, but it can be explained in a straightforward way. Or you can argue that he is lying or otherwise incorrect, or that neo-Marsch is a better SF writer than he is an anthropologist. But it is simply not the case that a variety of origin stories are presented in the text for the reader to choose between. The text tells exactly one story, involving a landing by humans, who were imitated by the aborigines, and who devolved into the Shadow Children. Right or wrong, that's what we are told.

You have to assume that Wolfe's characters are completely delusional even when conscious, and that the story is told, like that of Loyal To The Group Of Seventeen, in terms of symbology with no causal attachment to the overt meaning of the text.

Excellent analogy! If we change "No causal attachment" to "indirect causal attachment".

What would be the point of the story told in the text, if it has neither literal nor symbolic significance? I do not believe Wolfe writes stories as exercises in steganography.

I don't think such symbolism works if it contradicts the text.

Who wrote the story told by "Loyal To The Group Of 17"? Gene Wolfe right? Perhaps he is revealing his larger literary style in such smaller synecdoche.

I would say it points out that newspeak is ineffective for its intended purpose. (Such an observation might suggest that Wolfe leans toward conservatism.)

Is "Number Five" in any way an unreliable narrator? What is Gene Wolfe saying about himself in giving "Number Five" the name of Gene Wolfe?

Nothing, I believe. It is a little game he plays.

The problem is, we can easily generate a storm of such symbolism from any text.

If you accept connections that loose, you will find millions in every direction.

These are grave literary accusations to make against another human being. I can't speak for Marc but I can personally assure you that I don't find hidden messages about aliens in the instructions on how to assemble a shelving set. Nor do I find secret clues about mythological gods in the ingredient list on my cereal box.

That is precisely why aliens hide their secret messages in such things - nobody suspects them!

On the other hand, I do find hidden references to 1950's McCarthyism in the play *The Crucible* which is about Salem Witch Hunts even though the name "McCarthy" is never mentioned in the text.

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Likewise I find reference to Adolph Hitler in the Chaplin film *The Great Dictator*. In *Gulliver's Travels* I find secret references to 18th Century British society, even though Whigs, Tories, Protestants, Catholics and France are not mentioned once in the text.

And none of them correspond to what I am saying. I was referring to 'connections' supposed to indicate secrets of the story qua story. You do not assume that the witches have a secret book that is actually *Das Kapital*, that Picasso painted *Guernica* in blood scraped from the walls, that the sentences of Lilliputians can be decoded to indicate that they are involved in an internal squabble of some tenet of Anglicanism that they hope to co-opt Gulliver to solve. You separate the levels of significance.

In the same way we can see many echoes of colonialism in *_5HOC_*, but they do not impinge on the question of whether the alien species is capable of shapeshifting.

Anyway, a better analogy to the sort of thing I was talking about would be if someone developed an overly elaborate theory of *Guernica* based on references to electrical items included in or suggested by the painting, and ultimately came up with a theory that the painting secretly refers to Nikolai Tesla.

Am I really to ignore all possible deeper interpretations of artwork because the reference are not found in the main body of the medium? Am I really to accept the words of someone on the internet who tells me that if they don't see something in a work of art then it doesn't exist?

I could. But I think I would be missing a lot. "Art Must Be Taken Only At Face Value" is not a club I care to join.

"Art means whatever you want it to mean", conversely, is a proposition suited only to a club of one.

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 19 Aug 2014, 16:56 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

We could go back and forth, the three of us, for a million years. We should just accept we get different things out of the text, and will never convince the other. However, the real irony is that I think the majority of Wolfe's fiction actually works to prove that the implied and unstated is

actually real and authoritative, that its meaning is iron hidden behind a soft shadowy maze.

Thus, I stray to totalitarian interpretations that are I do not conceive as subjective (especially in matters of plot or theme, for example, in saying stories like "trip trap" show that subjectivity can be overcome by accessing a spiritual objectivity and communion with others - the whole story deconstructs its subjectivity by showing what is real is not that reality but something higher which only perceived by people in common). In that way I think wolfe uses postmodern techniques of uncertainty to obliterate the very concept of postmodern relativism.

Gerry and I are the totalitarians wolfe warned against in his introduction to endangered species. The difference is that I believe the one true solution is unstated and cryptically encoded but thematically and symbolically real as a discernible authorial intention. In answer to why the officer nods at the handwriting, I give an answer Gerry would never accept - wolfe wants the first, false solution to be one that seems reasonable, so that people might accept it as the officer does, without penetrating to the level behind it. The officer does not fully understand what has happened and comes to the first reasonable conclusion (but he still knows enough to shower away the girl's Saliva prophylactically - what an odd way to describe it if it doesn't involve a life cycle). Why? Because it is in his nature to do so.

In that way, Wolfe's fiction is the maze in The Adopted Father and in A Solar Labyrinth, with a fake exit that still "works".

I think there are many many wrong interpretations (like dialing in a solar labyrinth meaning anything but the math behind the construction of sundials and their shadows, like cues being about the bathroom, like sev's relatives having golden hair, like dr margotte showing up at the end of the doctor of death island being hopeful, like the navigator being Kennedy ... All not truly valid meanings or interpretations, some of them blatant misreadings) but Wolfe is not a surface level writer and does not believe in genre distinctions (his famous example being a comment about Free Live Free, where he is criticized for having a witch, a private detective, and time travel, and he says that hey, witches exist. This eclectic nature makes assignation of impossibilities in his text due to perceived genre limitations extremely spurious and artificial.)

Much like the abortion debate, our starting premises are intrinsically different (it's alive and separate ... No, it is still ME, why can't you see that?) and no happy interpretive alliance can be reached, so we spin our wheels ad nauseum.

"Art means whatever you want it to mean", conversely, is a proposition suited only to a club of one.

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 19 Aug 2014, 17:03 · in reply to Marc Aramini

I think a part of this message was lost in draft form, sorry.

More charitably, perhaps wolfe wants to allow some freedom of interpretation, so we can walk away at a certain point - he wants us to know Marsch is replaced, and if we are satisfied with the obvious replacement as victor Trenchard, we need go no further, perhaps vaguely bothered by the meaning of A Story and the strange almost dysfunctional community extent on ste. Croix. But Wolfe knows if that is the real solution or not, as Joyce knew if the mysterious man in the mcintosh had a name and identity elsewhere in Ulysses, relevant or not.

On Tuesday, August 19, 2014, Marc Aramini <marcaramini at gmail.com <javascript:_e(%7B%7D,'cvml','marcaramini at gmail.com');>> wrote:
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- Gerry Quinn

Lee — 20 Aug 2014, 12:16 · follows Marc Aramini

Marc Aramini: We could go back and forth, the three of us, for a million years.

We should just accept we get different things out of the text, and will never convince the other.

Agreed.

However, the real irony is that I think the majority of Wolfe's fiction actually works to prove that the implied and unstated is actually real and authoritative, that its meaning is iron hidden behind a soft shadowy maze.

Again, agreed, completely. I find this to be a very plausible interpretation given that Mr. Wolfe may often have found himself the lone devout believer in worlds (engineering and SF) mostly populated by non-believers. He felt compelled to write at multiple, veiled levels, each to be understood by different "levels" of his readership.

What is the "proof" of God? Wolfe's message is that all the evidence for God is "implied and unstated", yet still, at a certain level, more real and more authoritative than scientific evidence for the material world. Marc, you probably already know this, but I urge you to be understanding and even sympathetic to the fact that there are some things that atheists are going to have a very, very difficult time understanding.

Gerry Quinn:> "Art means whatever you want it to mean", conversely, is a proposition suited only to a club of one.

Not always. Sometimes people's individual interpretations of art can be in congruence. In fact, I think most of the time, most people's interpretation of a work of art are mostly in congruence. It's the differences that make things interesting.