

Short Story 101: A Solar Labyrinth

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Marc Aramini — 22 Aug 2014, 14:32

A Solar Labyrinth

"A Solar Labyrinth" first appeared in **The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction** in 1983 and is reprinted in **Storeys from the Old Hotel.**

SUMMARY:

Mr. Smith builds a shifting labyrinth comprised of shadows, supposedly in the Adirondacks. Children and adults attempt to navigate the ever shifting maze, and eventually Mr. Smith and a single solitary child remain.

COMMENTARY:

The first sentence starts out with a rather bold statement: "Mazes may be more ancient than mankind." Certainly natural mazes and obstacles existed for primitive creatures, but given the love of myth, spirituality, and the mystical, we should note that a maze, at least in this story, seems to imply an artificial construct. The representational metaphor of creation, inherent in the name "Smith", a craftsman's name for one who works in metal as well as one who strikes or smites, ties in with this idea. Creation as humanity understands it certainly predates mankind, expressed as the labyrinth of the natural world. Wolfe perhaps hints at the existence of other ancient things before humanity but still real, perhaps now considered as mythical.

Without slipping into a Gnostic paradigm for the created world, where perception is an illusion and possibly a labyrinthine trap, there are still several patterns in the details Wolfe chooses. Of course immediate mention of Theseus is made, who follows a "clew" and becomes "the first in what threatens to be an infinite series of fictional detectives." The purpose of the Cretan labyrinth was to contain a curse from the gods in the form of the Minotaur, the child of Minos' queen and the white bull he failed to sacrifice to Poseidon, but there are other symbolic associations that fit very well with the idea of the labyrinth as something solar in nature. The name of the minotaur, Asterion, means "star", and some modern mythologists regard the Minotaur as a solar personification (he was the grandson of Helios through his mother), his death becoming synonymous with the slaying of the bull of the sun in ceremonial worship of Mithras. The concept of Theseus as detective ties in with the idea of the labyrinth as something that obscures meaning — that there is indeed a center that can be reached and an objective solution.

The other opening reference, to the story of Fayre Rosamund and her ball of thread, in addition to featuring an anachronism (Hampton Court Maze was constructed at the start of the 18th century, Rosamund Clifford, mistress of King Henry II, died in the 12th century), highlights a story of infidelity and murder — the purpose of solving Rosamund's Bower was to satiate the jealous ire of Queen Eleanor. Theseus' mission also involved death — slaying a monster which King Minos was using to exact his own revenge on Athens for the death of his son Androgeus.

Mr. Smith's maze here is quite different than the traditional labyrinth, as it is highly abstract in nature. He has created a shifting maze of shadows with no walls, and though some stay within its imaginary confines, others choose to leave when they grow bored of it. Its barriers are illusory, but they are cast by real objects.

The story states that recent mazes have been walled, cheap, and unimaginative — furthermore, aerial views allow “armchair adventurers” to solve them with a pencil. The text bemoans the loss of “monsters, maidens, and amazement”. Mr. Smith has developed “a new kind of maze, perhaps the first since the end of the age of Myth.” His maze is composed of fairly simple objects, but the starting point Mr. Smith selects for those who seek to navigate the maze becomes the center. He walks with them for a time, but the groups of children who come are treated differently. He warns them that a minotaur lurks in the shadows, and gives them the same instructions and encouragement. “Some reject his maze out of hand, wandering off to examine the tilted crucifex or the blue-dyed water in the tower Torricelli barometer, or to try (always without success) to draw Arthur's sword from its stone.” Here we have children choosing religion, science, or attempting valor and physical feats rather than intellectually engaging in Mr. Smith's maze.

Of course, Wolfe's statement in the introduction to **Storeys from the Old Hotel** is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy :

“Labyrinths seem to fascinate just about everybody, and for a while I was almost equally interested in what used to be called dialing. I tried to keep the sinister element well in the background, and it seems I kept it so far back that few readers notice it at all; but I like it that way.”

Something of a self-fulfilling prophecy — now we all seek the sinister. However, in light of the purpose of the labyrinth, there are only a few possibilities: murder, sacrifice, or becoming lost. Given Mr. Smith's proclivity for showing off photos of his latest Ariadne (nine years old - as at least one story notes that every nine years the tribute from Athens must be sacrificed to the Minotaur), the possibility of kidnapping and an obsession with children rears its head. It might be of some note that he does show the children what “haunts the shadows” — the frowning figure of the Minotaur, found on a section of the wall that “appears” ancient. Perhaps the Minotaur's threat is not as ancient as it appears. The bellowing of the bull might or might not proceed from stereos. We should note that Ariadne was actually in charge of the labyrinth (she is also the granddaughter of Helios).

The labyrinth is insoluble at noon, and “always, as the shadow of the great gnomon creeps toward the sandstone XII set in the law, the too-old, too-young, insufficiently serious, and too-serious drift away, leaving only Mr. Smith and one solitary child still playing in the sunshine.”

While they are at play, is the child the sacrifice demanded of the labyrinth or merely the special child that Mr. Smith has sought? Wolfe will touch on the threat of pedophilia in “And When They Appear”, but given that the dominant purpose of the labyrinth has always been violent or sacrificial, it is difficult to believe, save for the picture of the nine year old “Ariadne”, that Mr. Smith's intentions are predatory in a sexual fashion.

(Dialing is unequivocally the math and engineering behind creating the shadows on sun dials, taking into account the movement of the sun, which Mr. Smith has mastered to create his

labyrinth. Don't believe anyone who tells you differently.)

OTHER MYTHOLOGICAL ALLUSIONS

There are several solar deities mentioned in the text, including Tezcatlipoca and his equally solar nemesis Quetzalcoatl, who is said to lurk in the shadows that create the labyrinth. The temple of the war god Tezcatlipoca was positioned and constructed with the movement of the sun. Because there are few representations of Tezcatlipoca, some resources refer to him as the "invisible god", which might be ironic in light of the narrative claim that the representation of him is directly from the ruins of Teotihuacan. He was also depicted with alternating bands of black and yellow and was sometimes depicted as a jaguar.

Quetzlcoatl and Tezcatlipoca were enemies who destroyed each other's solar creations (the suns of the earth, water, and wind). This progressive cycle of competing suns is fascinating, with a new sun being born out of the destruction of the old one, under the province of a different solar deity, and might very well interest Wolfe in light of the direction he took in *Urth of the New Sun*.

The mention of Teotihuacan, the city of the Toltec, is interesting as well. The name of Teotihuacan means? the place where gods were born?, and the word Toltec implies "a craftsman of the highest level".

When Mr. Smith shows a picture of his latest Ariadne, we should keep in mind that Ariadne was in charge of the labyrinth where sacrifices were made. Even though she fell in love with Theseus, the labyrinth existed so that King Minos could exact his revenge on the Athenians for the death of his son.

The monster in the Labyrinth, the Minotaur, is actually King Minos' wife's son, and in some ways he came to be associated with the bull of the sun. The bull is one of the animals associated with the late Hellenistic and Roman syncretic worship of Mithras. In this tradition, the killing of the astral bull holds a central important place in their worship.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS:

Besides the historical and mythological allusions explored above, I can't quite shake the feeling that the labyrinthine themes Borges enjoyed exploring in his short work are at play — he even gave the Minotaur a rather innocuous and human voice in "The House of Asterion" as he waited for his redeemer to come. Some claim that the title itself refers to explication of Wolfe's own *Book of the New Sun*.

REPRESENTATION:

Of course the entire story works as a metaphor for representation — the shadows are called "the faded blank ink of God." Words and ink of represent things, and Wolfe is a sophisticated enough symbolist to know that signifiers and signs often work in a way that is vague, approximate, subjective, or symbolic. These are the shadows on a page. Navigating the maze of shadows is the act of interpretation, with the Smith sometimes closely following along the same paths, while other times passing clouds and misprision or simply walking away allow the reader to escape thorny or difficult patches. Eventually artifice is stripped away, and as the sun reaches its zenith and sits directly overhead, the objects that the shadows represent are all that is left. We are left with the things themselves, and the labyrinth of shadowy ink has effectively ceased to exist

What other monstrous things are left behind when the subterfuge of the slippery words and

shadows are stripped away?

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Since the Minotaur lurks in the shadows, and the shadows disappear at noon, does this leave the solitary child in danger when the maze and its shadows disappear?

If the dominant metaphor navigating the shadows is of interpreting a text, what danger does this represent to the child who is perfect for Mr. Smith's intentions? At noon only the objects as they really are exist, and the "ink" distorting those objects and creating illusory boundaries fades away.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS:

While the story is completely coherent and "real", the backdrop metaphor for the act of writing (with the shadows the faded ink of God) places this work in the more symbolic short stories, the fables, allegories, and dream scenarios that began to populate Wolfe's work in the mid-seventies with "Melting" and "To the Dark Tower Came" and continued throughout his career.

Neil Gaiman read the story during the presentation of the Fuller Award to Wolfe in March of 2012, and commented that he still wasn't sure if he should be terrified or not. His own contribution to **Shadows of the New Sun**, "A Lunar Labyrinth", clearly stems from this one. In Gaiman's story, the sinister rears its head quite overtly before the conclusion.

A tourist comes to a small town in search of local monuments, and an older man takes him up to a mazelike labyrinth on the night of a full moon, its edges ringed by rosemary. Our narrator, who claims he "was not a real torturer", has the Wolfean leg injury, from falling on the ice on his left knee the previous year, and his elderly guide walks with a cane. He begins by asking, "So how did it end??, to which his guide responds, "It never ends," though he admits the people tried to burn the labyrinth, believing it to be too costly.

The motifs that Gaiman develops throughout the story are those of the moon looking down at the hedges in its various phases (only children walk it during the dark moon, and some believe they see a torturer then), the scent of roasted lamb, and the growth of the rosemary around the maze ("Rosemary is for remembering"). Most of the month, the maze is an innocuous entertainment tied to "canoodling" or making out, but on the night of a full moon, it becomes something more akin to a sacrificial test — if someone running the maze cannot get to the center and back out without a misstep, "the labyrinth gets to cure you of all that ails you."

The cycle of the moon affects the emotions involved — as it grows fuller the people who come to walk it interact with desire or lust (though that is the time when the sick and infirm can walk the labyrinth), but after the sacrifice of the full moon, as the moon wanes, it is with love. According to the guide, after the dark of the moon, young children (whom he calls Romulus and Remus, children famously suckled by a wolf) and parents arrive to navigate it, and as it waxes, couples of all ages come. He dismisses the labyrinth of Crete as nothing in comparison, "just some tunnels with a horn headed fellow wandering lonely and scared and hungry."

When the narrator gets to the top, "the sky [is] the color of wine, and the clouds in the west glowed with the light of the setting sun." He notes that his guide "was an old man who walked with a stick and talked to strangers — Nobody would ever miss him." The guide assumes a lycanthropic guise at the top, and our narrator is forced to run the labyrinth, believing that the moon, who had always accepted his gifts before, will not betray him. He runs "like a lamb to his

laughter.”

Gaiman’s story does not seem to pivot on the metaphor of the labyrinth as a fiction, though the appearance of a torturer, a werewolf who walks with a cane, and rosemary certainly serve as links to Wolfe’s life and work. The narrator is a killer who sacrifices to the moon, but here he faces an older mythic lunar power, that affects humanity with an increasingly bestial and atavistic fervor before the sacrifice is made, at which point the cycle of the moon allows genuine emotion to transpire between the couples that come to navigate the labyrinth. Only in the dark of the moon does the labyrinth seem innately tied to fiction — perhaps pre-rational myth is a more appropriate context for the lunar labyrinth. The murderer appears to be on track to become the next slaughtered lamb. Clearly the majority of Gaiman’s references are designed to pay tribute to Wolfe (though, unlike Wolfe, the older guide with the cane has a sister who gives birth to something monstrous after walking the labyrinth). “A Solar Labyrinth” probably dealt with the process of reading and representation as a whole, with the sacrificial aspect almost removed from its dominant metaphor; “A Lunar Labyrinth” seems more concerned with mythic cycles affecting behavior in addition to pulling symbols and motifs from Wolfe’s own life.

Gerry Quinn — 22 Aug 2014, 14:38 · in reply to Marc Aramini

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Marc Aramini — 22 Aug 2014, 14:45 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

On Fri, Aug 22, 2014 at 7:38 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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Given Inire's proclivity for children and taking them to places in his mirrors via the reflection and intensification of light, I actually have to agree that there are some parallels there, though this labyrinth is a bit more mundane than Inire's mirrors.