

All the Hues of Hell

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 03 Jul 1997

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Ron Crown — 03 Jul 1997, 09:30

Alga mentioned a while back that The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories is coming out soon and would be fun to discuss. I've been reading a couple of Wolfe short stories reprinted in David Hartwell's The Ascent of Wonder anthology and thought maybe a discussion of these could jump start us with short stories.

SPOILERS FOLLOW

The first story is the one mentioned in the subject line. For those of you who haven't read it or may have forgotten it, the story is about a crew of three, two humans and one mechanical being of some type (this is one you have to suss out for yourself, BTW, though considering it's Wolfe, the clues are fairly obvious), investigating while in orbit around it a world of "shadow matter"(dark matter?). While observing the shadow planet they discover a humaniform being of some type, capture it and bring it on board their vessel. One of the human characters thinks he is dead and that the vessel has actually reached Hell and its never made clear (at least not to me) whether this character is actually dead or (as the crew robot claims) insane.

Anyway, the main question for me is the ending. The crew has a pet macaw (named Polyaris; can anyone think of other Wolfe stories with birds who figure importantly, Oreb is obviously one) who suddenly begins a screech that signals "Danger! Fire! Flood! INVASION and CATASTROPHE!" The shadow being then begins to change color from an original "dusty pinkish brown" fading to gray and then white. He then curls into a fetal position.

At the same time the female crew member, who is carrying the male crew member's child has not observed any of this but is touching her belly and says "It moved [i.e. the fetus]! It just moved. I felt life!" End of story.

The editors blurb compares this ending to the end of 2001 but it seems to me there is a little more going on here, though as is usual with Wolfe, I'm not sure what. For one thing, there seems to be some sort of parallel being drawn between the female crew member's pregnancy and the crew's vessel (named the _Egg_) being fertilized (?) by the shadow creature (representing a sperm? I'll have to go back and check the description) coming on board the vessel. The shadow being is kept in some type of stasis field, not called that but referred to as a "yolk;" this "yolk" only appears when the shadow being is brought on board.

And I haven't even mentioned the color imagery which is obviously of great significance (see the title) but maybe this is enough to get some discussion going.

BTW, the story is also found in _Endangered Species_. The other story in The Ascent of Wonder is "Procreation" but I'll leave that for another time as this has gotten long enough already.

Ron Crown
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Jim Jordan — 03 Jul 1997, 21:30 · follows Ron Crown

A bit more:

Skip is from skipper, which he should be, but isn't, because the robots are.

KUL 23011. I don't have a complete Greek dictionary, but like "aris," we should see if "kul" means anything.

23011 might mean 666, like this: $2 \times 3 = 6$, $x1 = 6$, $x1 = 6$. I would not suggest this except for the use of 666 in "Fifth Head." In a story about hell and antichrist, we might expect Wolfe to use 666, as he did in "Fifth Head."

Nutria

Jim Jordan — 03 Jul 1997, 21:13 · follows Jim Jordan

I'll bite.

For one thing, the pregnant woman is named Marilyn, for Mary.

For another, it seems that humanity is now ruled by machines (the Director and Kyle, for instance). That's bad.

Moreover, it is clear that Kyle (largely a machine) wants Marilyn. Did he kill Skip? The implications are that he did. Skip, or his ghost, says that Kyle wants the shadow man; he and the Director do.

Is Skip right that the shadow man is a demon? There are hints that he is. The shadow man has horns, which mystify robot Kyle.

When the shadow man dies, Marilyn feels her baby move. Clearly, the shadow man has moved into her womb. Antichrist is soon to be born. Compare the

Fifth Head of Cerberus original novella (part one of the triptych).

The machine rulers of humanity have no perception of good and evil, or God and demon. They simply worship all life, regardless of its place in the scheme of things. Unwittingly, they have now introduced antichrist into the world.

The bird, Polyaris, realizes this. Poly means many, but Aris I did not uncover.

Color imagery: The bright colors of Polyaris are true nature colors; the shadow is invisible. It may be seen (rightly) as a series of hellish hues (Skip), or appear as an angel of light (Kyle and Marilyn).

I'd take the title as the clue: This really is hell.

Nutria