

St. Paul & the Werwolf

The Urth list — 5 messages, 3 voices, 29 Jun 1998

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Robert Borski — 29 Jun 1998, 23:25

Over the years I've recommended quite a few of Gene Wolfe's short stories to my stauncher Catholic acquaintances, citing New Testament readings as collateral gloss. "The Detective of Dreams," for example, draws much from the Gospels of Mathew and Mark, while "Silhouette" obtains from the Gospel of John and the Pseudepigrapha. But the story I recommend most often is "The Werwolf as Hero," not only because it's a fun read, but because I feel much of it is based on the writings of St. Paul, perhaps the Catholic Church's most important personage after Christ.

Paul, our titular hero, is symbolically innocent when we first meet him, although he will receive wisdom in the course of the narrative. This is signaled by the very first sentence of the story, where an owl shrieks and Paul flinches. Notice as well how Paul derives from the Latin word for 'small' and the way he is sitting, with his knees together (the virgin position), while later, when he contemplates luring potential victims he considers crying like an infant (significantly, however, he rejects this notion and plans on using a silver bell, a much more Christian image). The victims in this case are the new stewards of Earth, the so-called Masters, genetically re-engineered humans, whereas Paul and his kind have remained true human. Paul's last name is Gorou, which derives from the French word for werewolf, loup-garou; minus the 'loup,' gorou/garou can be taken to mean 'man.' (Paul is also the Son of Man, i.e., Jesus Christ, especially in the last scene. It's also extremely worth noting that the Greek word for wolf, lukos, is frequently confused with the Greek word for light, leukos. In fact, I submit this difference in a single *e* is why Wolfe uses the variant spelling of werwolf). These so-called Masters also revere science over religion, as witness the four-dimensional diorama built to Hugo de Vries, the father of mutation, who undergoes, as Paul watches, death, "rots" and then is reborn in the manner of Christ (although "rots" conveys the truer nature of de Vries' artificial resurrection). Paul's stalking of Masters might also be considered a parallel to St. Paul's persecution of Christians, whom he considered traitors to Judaism, at least until he himself converted.

But just as Paul is about to attack his two victims--a fat man and a woman wearing a dress "of flowering vines the color of love" (the flowering vines may represent orchids, research on which allowed de Vries to formulate his theories on mutation; they also represent sexuality, as does the serpent of gold supporting the woman's breasts)--two other figures join the scene, a grey-haired man named Emmet Pendleton and his young daughter Janey. The trio of humans kill the two Masters, but a quarrel breaks out after the slayings as to how they will divvy up the goods. Paul is also immediately attracted to Janey (he senses her "femaleness, the woman-rut"), symbolizing his growth from childhood to adolescence. But Paul and the Pendletons soon part, each with a dead Master, although already Paul is contemplating life with Janey. (Note however how Paul mentions the dead male Master's meat will be tainted by his testicles i.e., sexuality spoils corporeal worth).

Then in one of the story's more surprising moments the dead woman Paul is carrying speaks to him. This symbolizes a false resurrection (cf. the de Vries diorama scene), and eventually the woman will be totally dead, but the scene also conveys several important plotpoints. Asks the

woman of Paul: "How come you didn't change? When the rest changed their genes?" Paul's reply: "We didn't want to. We are the human beings." Thus some choice has been involved with his remaining human (unlike the Pendletons who have had changing withheld from them). The woman also tells Paul she and the other dead Master were not married. It's important as well to notice how her eyes' growing opaqueness signifies the imminence of true death.

Libidinally aroused by Janey, however, Paul delays eating the dead Master and instead goes looking for the Pendleton's lair, which he finds in an old bus. Notice how Paul's house has a turret, with its association of churchliness (it's also respected by the Masters, who fear destroying it "will bring back the old times"), while Janey's father calls their home "a dump." The bus also stinks of blood (an image of death).

Emmit Pendleton subsequently begins to fill Paul in on his family's background and one of the things we learn right away is that the Pendletons have been rejected as candidates for gene therapy/mutation because they carry potentially deleterious genes (do bad genes equal original sin?); thus their humanity has nothing to do with choice, it's theirs by circumstance; i.e., to bring in the Christian parallel, they are not believers by choice, but falsely so, by omission. Now consider the name Emmit. Emmet (its closest cognate) derives from the Hebrew word for truth. Notice again the missing signal *e.* Emmit, I submit, means 'false truth.' As for Pendleton, pendle = pendant (OED), and a pendant weighing a ton recalls the millstone of Biblical provenance ("Whoso shall offend one of the little ones which believe in me [remember Paul means small], it were better for him that a millstone were hanged around his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea").

Emmit also mentions a previous suitor of Janey's--"Nice fellow, a German. Name was Curtain--something like that." I submit the word Emmit means is 'kirchen,' German for churches. The suitor in question, despite having been promised Janey's hand, has never returned, symbolizing God's withdrawal.

Then there are the chickens the Pendleton's used to raise for their livelihood; all of them have died of sickness, and if we accept the egg as a potent sign of rebirth, this symbolizes their failed rebirth as humans. Then there are a number of images that play off of blindness. Perhaps it's best at this point to remind everyone that St. Paul was struck blind, but recovered and converted to Christianity. Remember the pearl-colored eyes of the Masters, as well as the growing ocular opaqueness of the dead woman Paul has killed? Emmit's sister Clara (despite her name) is born blind in one eye, and later Janey will have to be veiled because there is "a blankness of eye" to her that betrays her as non-Master. All of these symbolize the Pendletons' inability to see (i.e., believe in and accept God). Lastly, notice how machines tear up the Pendletons' farm the night before Xmas and how a brother named Tom has his leg impaled by a two-by-four (read Crucifixion), whereupon "rot" sets in (cf. the de Vries diorama), and he dies. Almost all of the Pendleton family history is tied up in images of blindness, death and oblivion. But does this in turn mean they can never achieve salvation? Not in the Catholic religion, and even Emmit seems to realize he's made mistakes, as he confesses to Paul, "Even a bad man can love his child."

Also notice how Wolfe describes Paul in the very next paragraph as he and Janey leave together. "**Her husband** took Janey and led her out of the ruined bus." (Italics mine.) This very obviously is meant to recall St. Paul's oft-quoted dictum from 1 Corinthians 7:9: "It is better to marry than to burn;" i.e., sex outside of marriage will lead to hell; and recall now the fate of the female Master who specifically mentions not being married to the fat man she accompanied.

No consummation between the new Mr. and Mrs. Gorou takes place, although in the very next scene Janey is wearing a grotesque parody of a wedding dress, complete with red veil. Here she

is less Little Red Riding Hood and more the Scarlet Whore of Babylon ('lupa' in Latin means both she-wolf and prostitute), and she and Paul manage to trap a potential victim in a downshaft. It's important to note here Janey's physical (as opposed to spiritual) hunger as she takes the lead in chasing after the boy; Janey also has no dialogue in the entire story, although she does moan and sob, and she delights in cutting up her victims while they're still alive, recalling animals who play with their prey like cats. All these images play to her unredeemed bestial nature.

But then something miraculous of a sort happens. Paul is trapped in a closing door by his foot, like an animal in a trap, and Janey must gnaw his foot to the bone so he can escape. Her concern, in other words, has turned to the altruistic, to something other than satisfying her baser needs, and this is symbolized by the act she ritualistically performs on her husband, not of eating meat, but freeing him from the fleshly bonds that constrain him. I'd also be remiss if I didn't mention the Eucharistic significance of this.

The last image we have of Janey then recalls Mary Magdalen (another reformed 'lupa') washing the feet of our Lord: "Over the pain he could feel the hot tears washing the blood from his foot."

Lukos has now become leukos. Redemption has been achieved and both Paul and Janey may yet know God.

My very last words on their salvation?

Forever and ever amen.

Robert Borski/scolex (who's surprised he can spell his own name correctly, having gotten Delage wrong every time in his previous post)

mary whalen — 02 Jul 1998, 01:17 · follows Robert Borski

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

On June 29, 1998, Robert Borski wrote a comparison of the story the Hero as Werewolf to St. Paul, and other Biblical stories that I feel was very perceptive.

However, it seems that you (if I'm wrong I apologize) think that almost no time passes between the scene where Paul takes Janie away from her father to when they attack the child. You say that Paul "marries" her, but doesn't consummate the marriage.

Actually, it's been quite a while since they met at that point. Long enough for Janie to have gotten clothes from Paul's house (or a new victim), for her to get used to him and develop an attachment for him, and long enough for them to have hunted together, so I think they would have had plenty of time to consummate their "vows."

Also, you say that since Paul's last name is Gorou, as in the French word loup-garou (werewolf), that since the loup is taken off his name, garou would correspond to man and make him symbolically the "Son of Man." However, garou is the term that meant werewolf in the word originally. Garou from garoul from garulf from gwerewolfe which also gave werewolf in English. It's a Germanic root, and the French forgot this and added the loup part to make it sound right to them. Wolfe would probably have known about this, so how does it fit your theory (not that your theory needs to be concerned with this minor detail)?

On another topic, has anyone noticed just how often Wolfe puts people eating other people in his stories? It's in Fifth Head of Cerberus, Tracking Song, the Book of the New Sun, and probably

others, too. Is all this just related to the Eucharist?

prion

Jim Jordan — 06 Jul 1998, 23:23 · follows mary whalen

At 01:17 AM 7/2/98 -0700, you wrote:

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

On another topic, has anyone noticed just how often Wolfe puts people eating other people in his stories? It's in Fifth Head of Cerberus, Tracking Song, the Book of the New Sun, and probably others, too. Is all this just related to the Eucharist?

It is most definitely related to the Eucharist in the Severian Cycle, generally in a "counterfeit" form. I can't recall it in 5th Head, but it has been a while since I read it. I don't think it carries that freight in Tracking Song, though.

Jim Jordan

Jim Jordan — 07 Jul 1998, 01:12 · follows Jim Jordan

At 11:25 PM 6/29/98 -0500, R. Borski wrote regarding "The Hero as Werwolf":

Paul, our titular hero, is symbolically innocent when we first meet him, although he will receive wisdom in the course of the narrative. This is signaled by the very first sentence of the story, where an owl shrieks and Paul flinches. Notice as well how Paul derives from the Latin word for 'small' and the way he is sitting, with his knees together (the virgin position), while later, when he contemplates luring potential victims he considers crying like an infant (significantly, however, he rejects this notion and plans on using a silver bell, a much more Christian image). The victims in this case are the new stewards of Earth, the so-called Masters, genetically re-engineered humans, whereas Paul and his kind have remained true human.

I'm not sure how you're seeing this story. Do you see it as an allegory, with the Masters as the Church, and the older humans as Jews and pagans? If so, I find trouble seeing it through. Or, are the Masters a false development of humanity, with Paul as a potential savior of what remains of humanity? The latter is how I take it.

These so-called Masters also revere science

over religion, as witness the four-dimensional diorama built to Hugo de Vries, the father of mutation, who undergoes, as Paul watches, death, "rots" and then is reborn in the manner of Christ (although "rots" conveys the truer nature of de Vries' artificial resurrection).

I don't see how this shows that the masters revere science over religion, and I don't see how the diorama, which starts de Vries over as an embryo, connects to the idea of resurrection from the dead. It just does not seem a valid parallel. But they HAVE been tearing down churches, so in general I think your first point is right.

Hmmm. As I think about it, maybe I see what you mean. The de Vries diorama is the new replacement icon for the cross or icon in the Church. But unlike the Christian "diorama," we don't have death and transfiguration to a new kind of life and existence, but an endless cycle of rebirth in the present world. Man playing at being God, but getting no farther than endless repetition; as in "Fifth Head."

Paul's stalking of

Masters might also be considered a parallel to St. Paul's persecution of Christians, whom he considered traitors to Judaism, at least until he himself converted.

Maybe, but then he should be "Saul," not "Paul." I'm not trying to be contentious, but this just does not quite seem to "fit." He's PAUL. He's fighting "principalities and powers in high places."

But just as Paul is about to attack his two victims--a fat man and a woman wearing a dress "of flowering vines the color of love" (the flowering vines may represent orchids, research on which allowed de Vries to formulate his theories on mutation; they also represent sexuality, as does the serpent of gold supporting the woman's breasts)--two other figures join the scene, a grey-haired man named Emmet Pendleton and his young daughter Janey.

The golden serpent attacks Janey, recalling the serpent's attack on Eve in the garden. The "masters" (recall Maitre, in *5th Head*) are antichrists, dominating a future world that has gone to evil under the mask of progress and scientific achievement. The serpent does not succeed, which might relate to the serpent that bit Paul in Acts 28, which bite had no effect. (?)

The

trio of humans kill the two Masters, but a quarrel breaks out after the slayings as to how they will divvy up the goods. Paul is also immediately attracted to Janey (he senses her "femaleness, the woman-rut"), symbolizing his growth from childhood to adolescence. But Paul and the Pendletons soon part, each with a dead Master, although already Paul is contemplating life with Janey. (Note however how Paul mentions the dead male Master's meat will be tainted by his testicles i.e., sexuality spoils corporeal worth).

Not only testicles, but also feces spoils the meat. I'm not sure this has any meaning other than to add to the realism of the narrative.

Then in one of the story's more surprising moments the dead woman Paul is carrying speaks to him. This symbolizes a false resurrection (cf. the de Vries diorama scene), and eventually the woman will be totally dead,

Well, the woman SAYS that she is already dead. Since she does not see this as any kind of resurrection, I'm not sure we can. Again, this seems to me to be merely part of the "SF realism" aspect of the story, without any symbolic overtones. Given that Paul kills these masters immediately, the only way we can see him have a conversation with one, and thereby learn a bit more about the scenario, is for them to live on for a while. I don't think, today at least, that Wolfe had any further intention.

but

the scene also conveys several important plotpoints. Asks the woman of Paul: "How come you didn't change? When the rest changed their genes?" Paul's reply: "We didn't want to. We are the human beings." Thus some choice has been involved with his remaining human (unlike the Pendletons who have had changing withheld from them). The woman also tells Paul she and the other dead Master were not married. It's important as well to notice how her eyes' growing opaqueness signifies the imminence of true death.

Yes, that they weren't married hints that these masters are not morally superior, and would militate against this being an allegory. (Of course, maybe they were just friends.)

Libidinally aroused by Janey, however, Paul delays eating the dead Master and instead goes looking for the Pendleton's lair, which he finds in an old

bus. Notice how Paul's house has a turret, with its association of churchliness (it's also respected by the Masters, who fear destroying it "will bring back the old times"), while Janey's father calls their home "a dump." The bus also stinks of blood (an image of death).

Paul's house IS a church. A garden between the two wings hints at it, as do the 8 windows in the turret. Paul thinks people should be superstitious about this particular kind of building, though the woman says that the masters had torn down plenty of them. Again, the masters seem to be antichrists.

This is as good a place as any to point out that the Bible, and Jesus of course, require that Christians be servants, not masters. "If any among you would be great, let him be servant of all" (Mark 10).

The bus with darkened windows reminds me of the catacombs. If I am right, we have Roman Masters persecuting Christians in this story.

Emmit Pendleton subsequently begins to fill Paul in on his family's background and one of the things we learn right away is that the Pendletons have been rejected as candidates for gene therapy/mutation because they carry potentially deleterious genes (do bad genes equal original sin?); thus their humanity has nothing to do with choice, it's theirs by circumstance; i.e., to bring in the Christian parallel, they are not believers by choice, but falsely so, by omission.

Well again, these are the kinds of people Christians are supposed to be especially solicitous of. The masters clearly are not. So I don't think their failure to be accepted into the masters connects to their not being made Christians. Rather, they don't fit the "brave new world."

Now consider the name

Emmit. Emmet (its closest cognate) derives from the Hebrew word for truth. Notice again the missing signal *e.* Emmit, I submit, means 'false truth.' As for Pendleton, pendle = pendant (OED), and a pendant weighing a ton recalls the millstone of Biblical provenance ("Whoso shall offend one of the little ones which believe in me [remember Paul means small], it were better for him that a millstone were hanged around his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea").

Here I think the opposite is meant. Emmit seems a good man, though like every good man he is aware of his badness. He wanted to marry his daughter to Curtain (Kirchen), which you rightly say is doubtless "church." Moreover, he moved to the city to get her a husband; he's not clinging to her. He seems to have good intentions throughout. Pendant might just as easily allude to the cross Christians often wear around their necks.

Emmit also mentions a previous suitor of Janey's--"Nice fellow, a German. Name was Curtain--something like that." I submit the word Emmit means is 'kirchen,' German for churches. The suitor in question, despite having been promised Janey's hand, has never returned, symbolizing God's withdrawal.

I don't think so. All the story says is that the masters probably got him. And we know that they've been destroying churches, so it fits the theme.

Then there are the chickens the Pendleton's used to raise for their livelihood; all of them have died of sickness, and if we accept the egg as a potent sign of rebirth, this symbolizes their failed rebirth as humans.

My tendency is to go with the story's own explanation: the masters did not care to provide for the remaining humans, and so the chickens also died. Not only people but nature suffered. Perhaps there is an allegorical element, derived from Matthew 23:37 - Jesus wanted to gather the people as a hen gathers chicks, but they refused, and so they died. The Masters kill the chicks. The Masters are the Romans, who kill the Jews (chicks) and persecute the Christians

(Paul, Emmitt, etc.).

Then there are a number of images that play off of blindness. Perhaps it's best at this point to remind everyone that St. Paul was struck blind, but recovered and converted to Christianity. Remember the pearl-colored eyes of the Masters, as well as the growing ocular opaqueness of the dead woman Paul has killed? Emmitt's sister Clara (despite her name) is born blind in one eye, and later Janey will have to be veiled because there is "a blankness of eye" to her that betrays her as non-Master. All of these symbolize the Pendletons' inability to see (i.e., believe in and accept God).

Maybe, but I'm coming to think that the humans are the good guys, and the masters the bad guys. Recall that in the Bible Leah had bad eyes, but she was a good wife to Jacob. Also, the girl in "Westwind" is blind and has a discolored eye, but she's a Christian. I can see that the imagery is eye and sight is in the story, but I'm not sure you've got it put together aright.

Lastly, notice how machines tear up the Pendletons' farm the night

before Xmas and how a brother named Tom has his leg impaled by a two-by-four (read Crucifixion), whereupon "rot" sets in (cf. the de Vries diorama), and he dies.

Well, if it's crucifixion, then Brother Tom is "Jesus" and Emmitt is definitely "Truth." It seems to me.

snip

No consummation between the new Mr. and Mrs. Gorou takes place, although in the very next scene Janey is wearing a grotesque parody of a wedding dress, complete with red veil. Here she is less Little Red Riding Hood and more the Scarlet Whore of Babylon ('lupa' in Latin means both she-wolf and prostitute),

I think not. Mary Magdelene is portrayed in a red robe, and Janey is definitely Mary Magdelene in the last scene. Of course, the red robe is also that of the Whore of Babylon, which I suppose is why MM has the red robe in iconography. But I don't think the Whore of Babylon is in view here, but simply MM.

and she and Paul manage to trap a potential victim in a

downshaft. It's important to note here Janey's physical (as opposed to spiritual) hunger as she takes the lead in chasing after the boy; Janey also has no dialogue in the entire story, although she does moan and sob, and she delights in cutting up her victims while they're still alive, recalling animals who play with their prey like cats. All these images play to her unredeemed bestial nature.

Yep. She's Mary Magdelene.

But then something miraculous of a sort happens.

Before we get there, we have to notice that Paul and Mary ASCEND on air. There has to be some reason why Wolfe wrote such an event into the story, and describes it in detail. Have they ascended to a counterfeit heaven, where they will be discovered and judged? It seems, though, that they escape, and therefore descend again. But along the way:

Paul is trapped in a

closing door by his foot, like an animal in a trap, and Janey must gnaw his foot to the bone so he can escape. Her concern, in other words, has turned to the altruistic, to something other than satisfying her baser needs, and

this is symbolized by the act she ritualistically performs on her husband, not of eating meat, but freeing him from the fleshly bonds that constrain him. I'd also be remiss if I didn't mention the Eucharistic significance of this.

I'm not sure of the Eucharistic overtones, but Paul does receive the biblical foot-wound (Genesis 3), making him a Messiah. Meanwhile, a voice is saying that a certain girl is going to grow up to be a physician, and Jesus is the Great Physician. The hint is that Paul will change from being a killer to being a healer, with Janey at his (churchly) side.
Maybe. :-)

The last image we have of Janey then recalls Mary Magdalen (another reformed 'lupa') washing the feet of our Lord: "Over the pain he could feel the hot tears washing the blood from his foot."

Yes. I think she has been MM all along.

Well, I'm sure this is not the last word! Thanks to Robert for getting this started.
Next?

Jim Jordan

Jim Jordan — 07 Jul 1998, 01:21 · follows Jim Jordan

At 11:25 PM 6/29/98 -0500, you wrote:

Over the years I've recommended quite a few of Gene Wolfe's short stories to my stauncher Catholic acquaintances, citing New Testament readings as collateral gloss. "The Detective of Dreams," for example, draws much from the Gospels of Mathew and Mark, while "Silhouette" obtains from the Gospel of John and the Pseudepigrapha.

Have you shared your interpretation of Silhouette? If not, please do so (so we can rip into it, of course!)

Jim Jordan